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KUMBHA

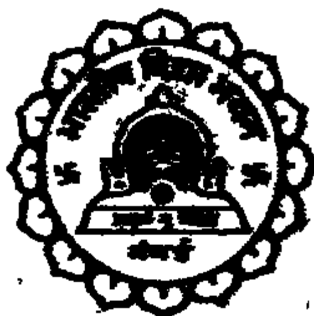
INDIA'S AGELESS FESTIVAL

BY

DILIP KUMAR ROY

AND

INDIRA DEVI



1955

BHARATIYA VIDYA BHAVAN

CHOWPATTY, BOMBAY

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GENERAL EDITOR'S PREFACE

THE Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan—that Institute of Indian Culture in Bombay—needed a Book University, a series of books which, if read, would serve the purpose of providing higher education. Particular emphasis, however, was to be put on such literature as revealed the deeper impulsions of India. As a first step, it was decided to bring out in English 100 books, 50 of which were to be taken in hand almost at once. Each book was to contain from 200 to 250 pages and was to be priced at Rs. 1-12-0.

It is our intention to publish the books we select, not only in English, but also in the following Indian languages: Hindi, Bengali, Gujarati, Marathi, Tamil, Telugu, Kannada and Malayalam.

This scheme, involving the publication of 900 volumes, requires ample funds and an all-India organisation. The Bhavan is exerting its utmost to supply them.

The objectives for which the Bhavan stands are the reintegration of the Indian culture in the light of modern knowledge and to suit our present-day needs and the resuscitation of its fundamental values in their pristine vigour.

Let me make our goal more explicit:

We seek the dignity of man, which necessarily implies the creation of social conditions which would allow him freedom to evolve along the lines of his own temperament and capacities; we seek the harmony of individual efforts and social relations, not in any makeshift way, but within the frame-work of the Moral Order; we seek the creative art of life, by the alchemy of which human limitations are

progressively transmuted, so that man may become the instrument of God, and is able to see Him in all and all in Him.

The world, we feel, is too much with us. Nothing would uplift or inspire us so much as the beauty and aspiration which such books can teach.

In this series, therefore, the literature of India, ancient and modern, will be published in a form easily accessible to all. Books in other literatures of the world, if they illustrate the principles we stand for, will also be included.

This common pool of literature, it is hoped, will enable the reader, eastern or western, to understand and appreciate currents of world thought, as also the movements of the mind in India, which, though they flow through different linguistic channels, have a common urge and aspiration.

Fittingly, the Book University's first venture is the *Mahabharata*, summarised by one of the greatest living Indians, C. Rajagopalachari; the second work is on a section of it; the *Gita* by H. V. Divatia, an eminent jurist and a student of philosophy. Centuries ago, it was proclaimed of the *Mahabharata:* "What is not in it, is nowhere." After twenty-five centuries, we can use the same words about it. He who knows it not, knows not the heights and depths of the soul; he misses the trials and tragedy and the beauty and grandeur of life.

The *Mahabharata* is not a mere epic; it is a romance, telling the tale of heroic men and women and of some who were divine; it is a whole literature in itself, containing a code of life, a philosophy of social and ethical relations, and speculative thought on human problems that is hard to rival; but, above all, it has for its core the *Gita*, which is, as the world is beginning to find out, the noblest of scriptures and the grandest of sagas in which the climax is reached in the wondrous Apocalypse in the Eleventh Canto.

Through such books alone the harmonies underlying true culture, I am convinced, will one day reconcile the disorders of modern life.

I thank all those who have helped to make this new branch of the Bhavan's activity successful.

K. M. MUNSHI

1, QUEEN VICTORIA ROAD,
NEW DELHI,
3rd October, 1951.

DEDICATION

To

Richard Miller

Who showed us once again that, East or West,
wherever one calls for Light

In simple faith—to him His Gleaming Grace
will come her troth to plight.

With love,

Dada

Indira

INVOCATION

RICHARD MILLER

1

O Flame of Love and Truth,
Burning flickerless in the storm-winds' throng!
Herald Lord Krishna, playing the Marvel Flute.

Lo, at the confluence of the twin hoary rivers,
He beckons in endless Grace to all who yearn!
Hark, hark, He calls to the waylost pilgrim souls:
"Come, come, my children! Fret no more for phantoms.
"Float on my gleaming ocean of loveliness,
"Sent in streams of ambrosia over India's mountains:
"Ganga and Yamuna flowing.
"My music upholds Duality's pauseless Dance,
"Creating lilts of Beauty in the world of pain.
"Absolved from ignorance,
"Plunge in the nectar of my plumbless Peace
"And, locked in my deep embrace,
"Merge in my oceaned bliss,
"Singing the paean of Love."

2

Miraculous white fire of benediction
Rains on the pilgrims' brows athirst for His Grace!
Shiva majestic, dancing aloft,
And moving momently nearer to the souls,
(Who, steeped in gloom, still hunger for His Love)
In one hand holds the chalice of Harmony
And in the other, Salvation's magic wand:
On the Ganga's waves He stands and smiles, the Immortal!
And on the Yamuna beckons, golden with Truth!

Lo, rose-red are His feet, ever young and dancing!
Into the abyss of mysteried sleep He pours
Song-nectar of celestial compassion
Which, billowing, carry the pilgrims on its crests
And delivering them from the stranglehold of Doom,
Impels them onward to the vast blue of Bliss!

3

Hail, Daughter of Paradise! resplendent Ganga!
Heed my lonely cry.
Naked, I plunge in thy sun-melody.
Renovate my fragile life with thy caress.
My tear-drunk eyes, O Mother, can see nought
But thy white bosom of bliss and purity.
O molten Compassion, descend
On our desolate Night with thy Day of Divinity!

O purling waters of Grace!
I hymn with my feeble voice
The miraculous bounty of thy holiness.
Let me nestle in thee,
Drinking, enraptured, in thy liquid laughter.

O Beacon of Heaven! come from thy viewless heights
To our wistful earth claiming her heritage
But never attaining, for we know not how
To win to the Eye of Light: this boon thou give!

O untrammelled waves of pure delight!
Deliver the God in man,
Pent in his fevered folly.
Redeem his dismal dark with thy epiphany:
Thy billows of bliss and beauty song-serene.

NEW YORK,
1st January, 1955.

TRADITION

SRI KRISHNAPREM—FORMERLY RONALD NIXON:

"For myself, Dilip, though I can be tolerant to all countries, I have only one, and that, strange to say, is not England but India. What I feel is that the wealth of tradition, which *is* a nation, is too precious a thing to be merged into a common hotch-potch from London to Yokohama. If we confine ourselves to Europe (at least Western Europe) the case is somewhat different as the traditions are more or less common. But can England and India, say, be mixed so philanthropically without doing vital injury to both? *When the traditions of a nation die, then the nation is dead,* even if it persists as a great power in the world, yet it is nothing but an aggregate of meaningless individuals determinedly pursuing their contemptible aims. History is a symbol, and what that symbol signifies is something infinitely more precious than a mere peddling adherence to a sequence of so-called facts. There is only one root Fact anywhere, and that is the Eternal One. Whatever helps to reveal Him *is* a fact, and whatever helps to hide Him *is* a lie even if all the fools in the world affirm it."

(Written from Lucknow University,
January 22, 1927.)

FOREWORD

It is always a pleasure to read a work of my friends Dilip Kumar Roy and Srimati Indira Devi. Educated in the West, Sri Roy has, by himself, and by undergoing the discipleship of Sri Aurobindo acquired a deep spirituality, essentially Indian. If he is a mystic, he is also deeply devotional. His outlook is modern and yet there is something in him of the ancient *bhakta*. Anything that he writes, therefore, is both instructive and inspiring.

The *Kumbha* has been rightly described as India's ageless festival. It has been one of the greatest phenomena in which the collective urge of a race finds expression. The *Kumbha* draws not only the mystic and the pandit, the ignorant villager and the superstitious woman, the business-man and the politician, but evokes deep-rooted sentiments in persons of the calibre, education and outlook of Dilip Kumar Roy and the highly sensitive and psychic Indira Devi. That it should evoke sentiments and lend inspiration to persons of such varied equipment in every stratum of life shows that there is something fundamentally important in the *Kumbha*.

This book gives a vivid description of the many sadhus and saints as also of the fakes and frauds whom they came across in the *Kumbha*. In that vast congregation, it was the ...n of God whom people sought after. Each one found ... he deserved. But faith was in most men and

women assembled there. In that way it was the national gathering of India which is the land of faith.

The authors have rendered a great service to modern India by giving not only their impressions of the *Kumbha*, but their own reactions to men and things whom they met there. I am sure this work will contribute to an understanding of men and things truly Indian and in this way reveal even to us the true mind and spirit of India.

RAJ BHAVAN, K. M. MUNSHI

Lucknow, March 23, 1955.

PREFACE

While writing this book we have often wondered for whom we are bringing out this rational defence of the irrational. I will answer this later. But there is another question: is such a defence necessary? This I cannot venture to answer because, frankly, we do not know. All we do know is that we have felt a strong impulse to pay our homage to the great tradition-builders of Indian spirituality commonly known as the sadhus. We felt a call to vindicate them because, though we were fully persuaded that they needed none to hold their brief, we thought we might pay our homage better in this way than in any other. I may add here also, and relevantly, that we have found a special joy in expressing our gratitude to them for being what they are, because we had sometimes wondered in the past whether they had not outlived their utility in the modern world. As the years have gone by, however, and we have come to experience what little we have done of the spiritual Reality, we have realised more and more that the sadhus of India continue to be the keepers of her spiritual conscience, the upholders of her highest *dharma* of the Soul. I went to the Kumbha Mela with my daughter-disciple, Indira Devi, who, though highly evolved spiritually, had shared my misgivings about many who are venerated as sadhus. But her doubts, too, were dispelled by what she saw and experienced, day after marvellous day! So we felt that to record our sincere and perhaps typical reactions, might be worth while: hers as coming from a modern woman born to wealth and culture and endowed with the modern faculty of criticism: mine as coming from a representative of those modern rationalists who are so utterly loth to take anything on trust. In fact, neither of us had thought, before we actually went to the Kumbha Mela, that we should have the kind of revelation we were given, of the soul of India of millennial wisdom.

Nevertheless it was somehow given to us to see, as though in a flash, what we had never believed it was possible to see, namely, the heart of India, anchored still to her faith in sadhus and to her veneration for spiritual values. This fortified us all the more, as of late we had both come to the conclusion that true spirituality cannot thrive very easily in a big organisation, that the sadhus had attained because they lived like solitaries, and that they lived in comparative seclusion because they found from experience that the flame of spiritual aspiration flickered out whenever a large body of men huddled and jostled together (mouthing mighty slogans but achieving astonishingly little) and burned brightest when the aspirant trod the path alone, or at best with but a few others who cherished the flame with all their will and faith and obstinate ardour. The sadhus at Kumbha made us realise this vividly because of the deep spiritual authority they had attained through long years of solitary *tapasya*.

The day of those formal religions which draw upon dogmas and churches is past. Nobody will seriously dispute this except those fanatics of ritualism who shout the more because, in their hearts, they believe the less. This does not mean that spiritual fervour and experience, which must be the soul of the body of religion, as Indira Devi has aptly put it, has also been outmoded. The day of miracles is anything but past, as any spiritual aspirant can verify for himself, provided he perseveres in travelling alone to the Alone: the eternal Soul of Man calls today as sleeplessly as of old to the One who is the sum-total-of-all-souls, to be given the strength to live for Him and to serve Him alone. Those great sadhus of India whom we had the good fortune to encounter at the Kumbha, made this faith glow in both of us till it came to radiate a light which was almost the light of knowledge. So we felt that we must testify to our reconversion to the old position that the everlasting values (*nitya*) can never fail, even though the temporal ones

(*anitya*) must change from age to age. In other words, the Lord will never abandon any sincere aspirant; whoever calls to Him single-heartedly will be answered; love will be met by Divine Compassion, trust by Divine Solicitude. This is the attitude of the great sadhus whom we met, a position taken by them *after* their Realisation.

Why then did we take so much pains to state this position, as old as the hills, since we knew full well that it could not appeal to the die-hard sceptics among our modern intelligentsia? Why have we found it necessary to vindicate the cause of spirituality and its prophets? The answer is that there are, in every age and clime, a few who are just evolved enough to hunger for the lore of the Spirit. These, living on the border-land of spiritual discovery, are often undecided and so oscillate between the call of the Soul on the one hand and Matter on the other; between reason and faith; between the gospel of the saints and seers and the glamour of science and fleshpots of the West. It is mainly for these few—for naturally, they are a minority—that this book is written. If even a handful among such true seekers are touched by what the Kumbha Mela revealed to us through its holy men, we shall feel amply repaid. The rest will continue to scoff and carp till doomsday. To each his Eden and, when all is said and done, a believer must aspire to serve his kin, the believers, who alone constitute his clientèle.

The last chapter—entitled *Contagion of the Holy*—was written last year, in America, primarily for Western readers. I had intended to add a few more essays on these reminiscent lines and publish them in the West. But as it seems unlikely that I shall have the time, in the near future, to accomplish this, I have decided to append this chapter, also because it deals with a few great saints and seers of modern India who have made history: to wit, Swami Brahmananda, Sri Mahendra, Sri Ramdas, Sri

Ramana Maharishi and my own Gurudev, Sri Aurobindo. I wanted to include Sri Krishnaprem also, but have thought fit to wait till I have the needed leisure to write adequately about his inspiring greatness. I may add that as our central theme is the sadhu who teaches through living the truth he stands for, these great Illuminates can hardly be looked upon as irrelevant.

Lastly, our thanks are due to a number of kind friends who have given us encouragement and chiefly to our Rajyapal, Sri K. M. Munshi for having supplied his valuable Foreword and to our host in Prayag, Sri Bidhubhushan Mullick, the Chief Justice of Uttar Pradesh, but for whose constant co-operation and loving championship we might have never had the easy access we had to the Lighthouses of Kumbha.

POONA,
January 1, 1955. D. K. R.

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INTRODUCTION

A phenomenal number of pilgrims congregated on the banks of the Ganga in this year (1954) to take part in the great religious festival known as the Kumbha Mela.[1] Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru said, on the last day of the Mela, that even he had never, at any time in his life, witnessed such a vast concourse of people. Generally speaking, the pilgrims were of three kinds: visitors, aspirants (*kalpavasis*) and sadhus. There is no word in English for sadhu, which is a generic term commonly employed to denote a seer, a saint, a sage, or an ascetic who has finally renounced the worldly life (*samsar*) to follow the exclusive life of the religious, and who—unless he happens to belong to a religious organisation (an *ashram* or *akhara*) which is dependent on public or private donations—lives on alms.

According to our Indian Calendar, the combination of the signs of Zodiac happened this year to be remarkably auspicious. It is said, indeed, that such a combination can only recur a hundred and eight years from now. This may have accounted in part for the record crowd that gathered at Prayag on a narrow strip of land in the January and February of this year.

The men and women who flock to the Kumbha Mela are attracted predominantly by one, or both, of two prospects: bathing at the confluence of two holy rivers, Ganga and Yamuna, and meeting the sadhus who assemble there from all parts of India.

First, the bathing. This year, the three most auspicious days for this rite fell on the following dates:

[1]Mela is a fair, a congregation assembled to celebrate a memorable day of festivity.

(1) *Makar Samkranti,* January 14—from 3.33 A.M. to 11.46 A.M.

(2) *Paus Purnima,* January 19—from 6.22 A.M. to 8.6 A.M.

(3) *Mauni Amavasya,* February 3—from 6.13 A.M. to 9.25 P.M.

The last of these, the *Purna Kumbha* day, as it is popularly called, is supposed to be the most auspicious day of the three and is the date on which the number of pilgrims attains its peak which, this year, was about six million, a staggering figure in all conscience. But the scene that met the eye was more staggering still, for it is no exaggeration to say that from a boat, a little distance away from the confluence, the eye could not discern the smallest patch of water for the sea of heads massed together! Those who had been unable to come on the other days thronged to it avidly on this day of days—of *Purna Kumbha*—as it was widely believed that by bathing on this day they could win swift absolution.

So much for the *mise en scène* of the call and the calendar. Now to touch briefly on the historical origin of this unique religious carnival.

We do not know exactly when the legend of the Kumbha first became crystallised and began attracting pilgrims, but we do know that the great Chinese traveller-historian Hiuen Tsang (otherwise Yuan Chwang) who came to India in the seventh century, witnessed this magnificent religious festival at Prayag, for he has left a graphic account of it. He writes that about half a million people gathered round about the confluence on that occasion and that the ceremony lasted for seventy-five days. The pilgrims comprised people from almost all ranks of life—from the Emperor Harsha-vardhan with his ministers and tributary chieftains, down to the beggar in rags. Among the participants, there were the heads of the various

religious sects, as well as, philosophers, scholars, ascetics and spiritual aspirants, from all walks of life. The Emperor performed all the rites with great *éclat* and (to quote the historian, Vincent Smith) "ceremoniously distributed the wealth of his treasury to people of all denominations on the ground, at the junction of the Ganges and the Yamuna, where the great fair is now held usually. Harsha was in the habit of making such distributions every five years, and the celebration in which Hiuen Tsang assisted was the sixth of the reign."

The date of this celebration was 644 A.D., so that it can be taken as the first account of the Kumbha Mela in recorded history. It is possible, however, that Harsha did not initiate the festival, but only adopted it and gave it a royal fillip in order to promote religious fervour among the people. It may be presumed that it has continued ever since down to our own day.

I need only add that in the ninth century the great Shankaracharya gave it the final shape by the force of his magic personality. He first of all established the four well-known monasteries: Jyotirmath in the north, Sringerimath in the south, Govardhanamath in the east, and Saradamath in the west. In each of these centres which he had created with the express purpose of advancing the cause of monotheism were classified into ten orders (*dashanami*): Saraswati, Puri, Bana, Tirtha, Giri, Parvata, Bharati, Aranya, Ashrama and Sagara. In each of these he nominated a head who was to guide the sadhus under his charge. These were exhorted to assemble regularly at the Kumbha Mela, with the twofold purpose of maintaining contact with the sadhus of other denominations and fortifying the spiritual aspirants. The people responded enthusiastically, for they were thus given the twofold opportunity of winning fresh inspiration through consorting with the sadhus and redemptive bathing in the sacred rivers.

I was told by a great Yogi at Haridwar, that the Kumbha Mela fulfilled another highly important function which today is nearly lost sight of, but which is none the less remarkable, both from the historical and the spiritual point of view.

"The sadhus," he said, "not only inspired us, the spiritual seekers, individually, but they played a highly important social part as well, by having acted throughout the ages as our monitors and legislators. The Lord speaks in the Gita of the ideal of *lokasamgraha* which means holding people together by giving them day-to-day guidance. This has all along been achieved by our sadhus *qua* lawmakers, for it was they who first enunciated the codes of social conduct which the Kings only stepped in later to enforce. We, in India, never appealed to lawyers and the so-called practical men to lay down the laws which were to regulate our lives: we looked exclusively to our spiritual leaders to formulate those codes and canons of conduct and justice by which our daily lives were to be governed and our spiritual evolution expedited. But in those days it was by no means easy to travel from one place to another and the sadhus lived far apart from one another. So it was that they agreed to foregather periodically in order to discuss ways and means of giving practical guidance to the ordinary man through such legislation and reform as might be called for. These conferences of sadhus may be compared to the sessions of our modern Parliaments which pass new bills when needed and repeal such vogues as are outmoded. Their ways differed from ours only in this," he added with a smile, "that the authority they wielded came from above and not, as in our days, from below. In other words, the sadhus' rulings were accepted not because they were the elected representatives of the ignorant—which they were not—but because they were the accredited servants of the Light which prevailed because the common man's humility made him intuitively receptive to its lead."

What he said was, indeed, revealing. For it made me realise forcefully—and I felt a glow of pride when I came to ponder its implications—how Hinduism had, at every step, drawn its final sustenance not from the unenlightened intelligence of its canny intelligentsia, but from the truly illuminated wisdom of its élite: its spiritual men—its seers, saints and sages. The scales seemed to fall from my eyes and I saw the Kumbha Mela in, as it were, a new light. I stress this from the personal point of view, because this highly important function of such spiritual congregations is often ignored even by its beneficiaries.

Of course I do not claim—though I dearly wish I could—that our lives today continue to be regulated by the deliberations of such senates of saints and seers as I have described, instead of those of premiers and politicians. Nevertheless, the spectacle of the sadhus gathered together still moves us strangely in that we seem almost to glimpse once more a better possibility of the ordering of our lives and so, in spite of our modern scepticism, we are made to pause in awe and bow down to them in respect, if not actual veneration. Of course there are many who deny this vehemently and who inveigh against the "unthinking homage" we still accord them. Enveloped by the confusion which reigns around us, we may even feel like laughing superiorly when told: "*Dharmo dhārayate prajāh*[2]—our life is only upheld by *dharma,* the sustaining light of the spirit." But, when all is said and done, the sceptic has never had the last laugh. The scoffer and iconoclast may, indeed, seem to score at a certain stage of man's evolution, but ultimately even he is bound to find out that one can no more live in the void of disbelief than one can build one's house on shifting sands. One of the chief reasons why the sadhus at the Kumbha Mela exercised the minds of millions and overawed many a sceptic, was their inexplicable success in living, as it were, on nothing. By what light were

[2]The *Mahabharata*—Karna Parva.

they sustained in this age of dominant darkness and ruined hopes? In a world where faith looks more and more like a misleading phantom, how could they achieve the radiance of certitude which the best of them do shed on everyone who came in contact with them? Above all, how did they manage to build their houses of inner beauty and bliss in a world of mounting tyranny and ugliness? It was because our reason was baffled that many of us bowed to them, even when we could not accept their gospel of renunciation and austere living. There was something in them so compelling, that we stood in awe, even when we professed to know better than they. As often as not, while wanting to resist, we none the less came under the spell of their impenetrable personalities and wondered how they could overawe us as they did against all the doughty defences of our resplendent reason and scientific materialism! We felt them to be near yet far-off, unassertive and yet challenging, non-interfering, yet subversive of all our intellectual concepts! Their beckoning seemed to be like that of stars—a call we could indeed, dismiss as intangible, but never ignore as something of no import. Yes, they were disturbing, yet strangely fortifying!

Lastly, a word of personal explanation about the genesis of this little volume.

I went to attend the Kumbha Mela with my daughter-disciple, Indira Devi, not so much to see what there was to be seen, as to ascertain, through our personal reactions, if what was viewed in such an alien context could help us to grow spiritually, and because we wanted to ponder and appraise our reactions, so that we might come to feel a little deeper and see a little farther than our noses, we started recording our impressions. It was, indeed, a happy and interesting experience for both of us in that, though we had, naturally, seen with different eyes, we had finally come to more or less the same conclusions. The differences between us, as it turned out, were only a matter of emphasis or, shall I

say, in our ways of assessing certain features of the stupendous spectacle. In other words, my disciple took in certain aspects of the spectacle which I had overlooked, and *vice versa*. But what struck me as most remarkable was that when, eventually, we came to compare notes, we discovered that we had both felt the same awed reverence vis-à-vis the incredible vista that had opened out and the breath-taking drama that was enacted before us, day after marvellous day! We agreed, gratefully, that we had been accorded a veritable revelation of India's soul which, in spite of the deep ravages of time and the persistent follies of the human ego, was still as young and sane as ever. We had been used to intelligent and learned discussions about things which no intelligence or learning could ever hope to fathom. We had been educated into proficiency in the art of vindicating our doubts about realities where doubts were out of place and had come to accept as our guides those who claimed to plumb multitudinous life with the sole plummet of realistic reason. But there, in that vast concourse of sadhus, we were suddenly confronted with a baffling world where the fundamental values and assumptions, not to mention modes of living, were as alien to those of ours as is the world of soaring birds to that of prowling beasts. The import of this discovery is difficult to bring home to those who have not seen what we saw, but an incident that came under our purview may help.

We were staying as the guests of our dear friend, Sri Bidhubhushan Mullick, the Chief Justice of Allahabad, a beautiful personality, who constantly attracted the leading lights of modern India. Only a few among these took the sadhus seriously. To this small group belonged an old Maharani, a charming and devout lady of great innate refinement. She used to repair in the mornings to the confluence to have her dip and to come to our place nightly to attend our musical soirées, which she loved.

One day, when the crowd had all but reached its acme, she was being carried to the Ganga in her palanquin with great difficulty, because it had already become all but impossible to move in that jostling, seething humanity. Suddenly, she told us, she heard an outcry ahead, followed by a terrific stampede, when she was startled by the impact of a suckling flung straight into her palanquin. The mother who must have been hard-pressed by that milling crowd could, presumably, see no other way of saving her baby. The child was saved, but the mother, alas, could not be traced. So the kind-hearted Maharani had to act as foster-mother to the foundling.

On the last day of the Kumbha Mela another stampede broke out and about five hundred people died on the spot, before the police or volunteers could come to the rescue of the crushed and trampled pilgrims. It was on the surface a great victory for the unbeliever as against the believer. But unfortunately for the decriers, though the believers' hearts were sore, their faith remained unshaken. People constantly take risks in relief-work, in science, in experiments, in mining, in aviation, in the exploration of distant and alien countries, in mountain-climbing—even in sports and acrobatics. They often come to grief, but nobody seriously argues that this ought to deter men from the tasks they set themselves, far less that we must outlaw the impulse which drives them to run grave dangers. Why then should religious ardour alone be held suspect when it leads sometimes, as it must, to disaster and tragedy? Would not courage become a meaningless term if every noble aspiration prospered all along the line and terminated happily? The pilgrims who undertake such incalculable pilgrimages know full well that dangers lie in ambush at every bend, and that anything may happen in vast gatherings massed together on a comparatively small strip of land. Even when every possible precaution is taken and the organisation is all but perfect, an unpredictable element is

always apt to vitiate the most fool-proof planning. It may sound unsympathetic to those who do not believe in the taking of risks arising out of a religious impulse, but the Lord, as all the mystics have said with one voice down the ages, does not see with our eyes and so, even when we claim and feel that we are doing His will, His planning must often upset ours. And one of His ways has been, as may be seen from the records of hagiography, the setting before His devotees of ordeals which seem to the outward view to be ordained by a somewhat pitiless Designer who ill accords with our mental conception of the merciful Divine. But the true mystic, even when he suffers, never revolts. He may, indeed, complain now and then but, in the end, he always submits. So he cannot but tell you that the last wisdom is that of submission to His will as against the questioning of His ordinances and that the guiding motto of the true devotee should be:

Nābhinandeta maranam nābhinandeta jibanam
Kālameva pratiksheta nirdesham bhrityako yathā

That is :

Death nor life I sing, but wait
Like Time upon His guidance still :
I bow to what He would dictate,
As a servant to His Master's will.

These are no mere words with one who believes in Him and His functioning Wisdom and so the prospect of danger. or even death, can, in the last analysis, never daunt him. Those who truly believe in the purifying power of holiness will go again to the *tirthas* to win the inspiration they need, upbuoyed by their faith and knowing all the time that He will assay it again and again. And so long as this faith continues to sustain her teeming millions, India's soul cannot die.



Yogi Sri Jai Krishna Giri

CHAPTER I

WHY DID THEY COME ?

THE blushing dawn turned pale as the cadence of the music trailed off on the waves of the river. A joint prayer rose from many hearts and filled the atmosphere with an expectant silence. What a soulful invocation! It seemed as if Dada[1] had offered up his whole being in his song to his Lord. Slowly the boat moved on, entailing little ripples in the calm blue Yamuna. It was the 14th of January and it had been announced that two million people would bathe at the confluence of the three rivers, Ganga, Yamuna, and Saraswati. We were on our way to witness this stupendous spectacle.

Hundreds of thousands of pilgrims, from all over the country and from all walks of life, had come by all sorts of ways: in aeroplanes, in trains, in cars, omnibuses and bullock-carts. From remote villages, thousands had walked, half-clad and half-fed, in this bitter January cold. They had all come just to bathe at this one particular spot at a particular hour. As we drew near we could see nothing but a sea of heads popping up and down!

Why had all these pilgrims come? To attain salvation? Surely all of them did not really believe that salvation could be achieved so cheaply? Perhaps it is not the ultimate Salvation (*moksha*) that most people had in mind, but a deliverance from afflictions such as disease, poverty, frustration, boredom, enemies and, in rare instances, desires. Or was it perhaps that they thought that at such a propitious hour the Ganga would behave somewhat like the 'wishing

[1]Indira Devi addresses Dilip Kumar Roy as Dada which means an elder brother or grandfather.

tree' and that there would be a fair chance of at least some of their wishes being fulfilled? Or did they come simply because it was a pious act? Or was it because of some mysterious call of spirituality?

It has been said that in this call of spirituality there is nothing vague or mysterious. It comes very rarely, but when it does, the aspirant feels a definite pull, sometimes even against a major part of his own personality. Very often he struggles for a time to ignore it, but the pull is strong enough to wrench him off his moorings. The aspirant responds to this call mostly because he must, seldom for intellectual reasons. The reasons, justifications and explanations, all range themselves dutifully, later on. It is difficult to say whether the majority of those who came were even conscious of this call. Then why did they come?

Most of the pilgrims were very poor. For them it must have meant planning and saving, months and years ahead, to enable them to defray the expenses of this great pilgrimage. They may even have gone quite often without food to be able to save a few rupees every week. Then they had walked and walked, with their womenfolk and children, trudging along for days and weeks, spending the nights, not in wayside inns, but in the open, under the stars. These simple children of the soil may have had a spontaneous faith in their hearts' aspiration, though there are those who contend that it was little more than a herd-instinct which had impelled them to imitate what the others were doing. But this would be an uncharitable interpretation. These poor pilgrims must have been urged by an aspiration for some ideal, since they had made considerable sacrifices to be able to get there.

Prayagraj, the meeting-place of the three rivers, is one of the holiest *tirthas* in India. From the dawn of time, thousands of saints and spiritual aspirants have prayed and

meditated on the banks of the Ganga and the Yamuna. If it is true that every thought creates a trail of lasting vibrations, if it is true that no sound (*nāda*) is annihilated, but only stored in the earth-consciousness and that one can attune oneself to distant, or even bygone melodies, then is it any wonder that the vibrations created by these prayers and meditations should render these places holy?

Faith is a wonderful faculty, but true, simple faith is one of the most difficult things to attain. Superstition, herd-instinct, a formal acceptance born of inertia and the reluctance to discriminate—each of these may assume the garb of faith. It is seldom deliberate deception: more often than not it stems from confusion of thought.

Very few people have the gift, time or energy, to think for themselves. It is not felt to be a necessity by society at large. We are constantly repeating aloud borrowed thoughts. Our ideas are handed down to us in uniform packets by our educational institutions, newspapers, and platform-speakers: all these, taken with what our ancestors said and believed, go to make up the sum-total of our beliefs or disbeliefs, as the case may be. Constant repetition leads us to believe in almost anything. I realised this once again at the Kumbha Mela. Whenever a pilgrim was asked why he or she had come, the spontaneous answer was: "Why, such a day will not come again for another hundred and eight years: how then can one possibly miss this unique opportunity of attaining *punya* (virtue) on such a heaven-sent occasion?"

But even if the poor and illiterate did have faith of a sort, why had the middle classes, or the rich, flocked to the place? Was it merely to gain a little respite from the usual routine of entertainments? Perhaps in some cases it was just curiosity. There is a desire in most human beings to appear good and pious. Even if there were those in whom this subconscious desire was uppermost, should we condemn

them for indulging in this harmless form of the ego, rather than give them credit for at least laying a premium on purity and piety?

A striking feature of the Kumbha Mela was the constant clash of two opposing view-points—of the pilgrims on the one hand and the spectators on the other. While the pilgrim insisted that this was salvation, the modern intellectual proclaimed, even more assertively, that it was all medieval superstition. In both cases there was a fear of facing or admitting the undiluted truth, with the result that clear thinking was impossible. The rationalists were partially right: superstition and formalism do play a part in such beliefs. But surely that is not the whole story. Behind it all lies a long tradition, and this tradition—cherished and tended in India when her culture, learning and wisdom were at their peak—was handed down to us by some of the greatest thinkers, seers and God-realised men the world has ever seen. It is true that these beliefs have to some extent lost their original significance, but they abide with us still as enduring reminders of a great past.

Someone remarked that, statistically, one out of every eighty men in India had attended this Mela. There were about six million pilgrims on the final day: a breath-taking figure! No matter what the driving motives were for the masses, their superstitions and muddled thinking notwithstanding, it proves beyond question that spirituality as the highest *ideal* in life has not died out; and this is because Hinduism is founded, not on blind superstitions, but on rational and super-rational grounds.

A salient feature of Hinduism is its astonishing tolerance which has enabled it to absorb so many foreign ideals, ideas and cultures, while retaining its own rich individuality. The basis of Hinduism is spirituality, not a sectarian creed. Again and again we find in history that some of the greatest saints who have been worshipped by the Hindus, were

anything but Hindus by birth. The attainment of the spiritual Goal impelled our seers to rise above all castes and creeds. While in the rest of the world the authority and utility of religions are more or less diminishing—for the Hindus, the ideal of spirituality shines forth today just as brightly as it did three thousand years ago.

This unique gathering of millions of people stood out once again as an earnest that spirituality will survive all the blows and scoffings of this modern age.

CHAPTER II

THE KUMBHA AS A SYMBOL

SYMBOLS have appealed to man since the dawn of thought broke out of its night of sleep. The world we know is, indeed, derived from a higher one, the abode of Truth (*sadanam ritasya,* as the Veda puts it) but is, at the same time, a degraded form of it. Symbols remind him of the original form. The lotus, the winds, the fire, the elements, the cow, the horse, the sun and moon and stars—all have filtered down into his questful heart as missionaries of a veiled Divinity, sent to us to convey His message. The term *purna kumbha*—which literally means "the full pitcher"—is one among such highly revelatory symbols which have at all times held a fascination tor millions of mystics in India. We find, for instance, in the scripture: *Purnah kumbho jnānarupo hyamritam Brahmarupakam:* that is, the full pitcher is to be taken as a symbol of Nectar which by its touch leads one to knowledge of the Eternal.

Even as important, symbolically, is the *tirtha*[1], where pilgrims assemble for the attainment of purification. Even as far back as at the time of the Vedas, the confluence of the two rivers, Ganga and Yamuna, was hymned as one such *tirtha,* where men and women came together to achieve spiritual purification, especially in their last days. In the *Rig-Veda,* for example, we read that, "at the holy confluence of the white and blue streams those who come to discard their bodies achieve Immortality: *sitā-site sarite yatra samgate ye vai tanwam visrijanti dhirāste amritattwam bhajanti."*

[1]A holy town or village which stimulates the pilgrims' aspiration for the spiritual life and helps their inner purification.

In our great epic, the *Mahabharata*, we find the mighty warrior-saint Bhishma, asking the renowned Sage Pulastya, about the symbolic message of the *tirtha*. The Sage is rather elaborate in his answer and goes on to describe nearly two hundred *tirthas* and rivers and the specific boons they are supposed to confer on the aspirant. In the course of his informative discourse he goes so far as to say that the pilgrim who bathes at the confluence of the Ganga-Yamuna, wins absolution for his whole family (*kulanchaiva samuddharet*) and that even if he has perpetrated a hundred crimes, he is redeemed the moment he touches the Ganga, whose waters do away with his sins as fire does away with fuel (*dahatyagnirivendhanam*).

It is not contended that all this must be accepted literally; all that is suggested is that the ancients, who were no fools, were anxious that spiritual aspirants should adopt an attitude which was receptive to the sanctifying influence of the *tirtha*. This influence could only be operative when it was accepted with the simple faith of the devotee. The modern mind can, and indeed too often does, scoff at such doctrines as the sponsors of myth and superstition; but faith has always been held suspect by the intellect, because it resents being told that it is incompetent to assay the postulates of the former. So in all ages reason has lampooned faith, while faith has, in its turn, laughed at reason and gone on its way unperturbed. For the man of faith knows from experience that if he goes to the *tirtha* with that attitude of simple acceptance, which was commended by the ancients, he wins to a sense of liberation which is beyond the comprehension of his heckler, the rationalist. And knowing this, he can afford to ignore, if not to pity, the fate of those who deliberately prefer the barren prose of starving reason to the resplendent harvest of peace and joy that is to be reaped by the poet of faith and fervour.

But the quarrel is, at best, unprofitable, since the obdurate votary of doubt can never understand the joy of acceptance which accrues to the poet-proselyte of worship. Nevertheless, it may not be unrewarding to make a sincere attempt to come to a sympathetic understanding of the aspiration and faith of the millions of pilgrims who resort to *tirthas* and who, in so doing, brave discomfort, risk, at times even grave danger, to seek lasting inspiration through such pilgrimages. No doubt those who hold reason to be the final arbiter in all disputes, will not be dissuaded from carping at the claims of the religious, for such critics inveigh as they do because, thanks to their unimaginative approach, they miss the clue to the right perspective. Fortunately for the believer, however, the world is not entirely composed of rationalists and even the champion of the intellect cannot wholly resist the radiant beauty of the baffling apostle of pure faith and divine love. In other words, though the ancient war between the priest of faith and the crusader of reason still goes on and seems likely to continue indefinitely, there is no *reason* to suppose that the latter will win in the final phase of this seemingly everlasting conflict.

"For not by Reason was creation made
And not by Reason can the Truth be seen."[2]

The rationalist may, indeed, parry this thrust with some equally brilliant banter, but he will never be able to argue faith out of court, unless reason can offer its adherents something better than the bleak prospect of pleasures that give no joy and comforts that yield no peace. Besides, whatever our reason may claim, it can never be finally conclusive—for the simple reason that the findings of one pleader can always be challenged by another who sounds no less convincing. And last, though by no means least, the human heart has come to realise to-day that the

[2]Sri Aurobindo in *Savitri*, II. 8.

ultimate touchstone of the real must always be experience and not mental theorisings about what the real *should be*. So it may not be altogether uneducative to probe a little deeper into the message of the Kumbha Mela, if only to understand a little better the powerful spell it has cast on millions of aspirants in India throughout the ages. For among those aspirants may be counted thousands of the wisest seers and profoundest prophets of the race.

As we have already seen, Purna-Kumbha is cherished by our mystics as a symbol of the wisdom that leads to a Silence which stems not from vacuity but from plenitude. A picturesque simile of the great saint and seer, Sri Ramakrishna, may be quoted as relevant and revealing. He was wont to say that those who know but little make a great deal of noise like the gurgling of the pitcher immersed in the pond. It gurgles so long it is *being* filled, but the moment it becomes *full* the gurgling ceases. So it is, he added, with people who are loud in the land preaching and questioning: but the more one knows the less one likes to talk, till, with the attainment of final knowledge, one falls completely silent, like the pitcher of the simile. One is reminded forcefully of Laotse's famous epigram: "Those who speak do not know: those who know do not speak."

The rational critic may counter this by arguing (and fairly plausibly) that as this world of ours has been created to translate the potentialities of life into actualities, the progressive silence of men through deepening wisdom can hardly be regarded as a consummation devoutly to be wished. Expression would hardly be possible in a world where men aspired no more than to merge into that immobile Silence which is claimed to be the last wisdom. But the question does not arise, because no true Sage has ever counselled all to achieve silence here and now (supposing it were feasible) and then to go on living happily ever after in the fulness of their voiceless wisdom. All that he

has suggested—and very gently at that—is simply that the more one knows about the heart of the last Reality, the less is one impelled to indulge in wordy arguments. So it is that the dictatorial tone of the Sage dwindles in inverse proportion to the growth of his knowledge of the cosmos and the Beyond, and the more he sees and knows, the more he realises his humble place in the vast scheme of things. As an English thinker put it rather aptly: "All of us are wanted by the world but none of us are wanted much."

So much for the symbol of the Kumbha. Let us now strive a little to understand imaginatively some of the legends that have crystallised round it.

CHAPTER III

OUR QUEST REWARDED

THE strip of land between the Ganga and the Yamuna had been allotted to the sadhus and our car threaded its way through the phenomenal crowd towards this city of tents.

Dada had said that one of the main objects of his coming to the Kumbha Mela was to meet some enlightened souls, God-realised men. At least a hundred thousand sadhus from all over India had come to this holy festival: surely a few among these would be God-realised.

We decided to do some reconnoitring on the first evening; so we just drove round from one camp to another. It was, indeed, baffling! One hardly knew what to make of it! Hundreds of sadhus, their bodies smeared with ash, squatted in the open, clustered around little camp-fires, chanting holy *mantras*.[1] A few were practising austerities such as swinging in the air with their heads down, lying on beds of spikes, or sitting in difficult postures (*āsanas*). There were those, called the wandering sadhus (*parivrājakas* or *bikshus*), who never stayed in one place but roamed about tinkling bells and intoning incantations in a sing-song. Some remained standing for twenty-four hours. In one camp they would be stark naked, in another they were dressed in the most gorgeous robes. At one place they looked grim, their bodies emaciated by severe austerities; at another we saw Herculean physiques, acquired from years of strenuous exercise and good food. Some had taken the vow of silence; but many were using microphones

[1]A *mantra* is a string of words generally embodying a prayer or an invocation.

to lecture to large crowds. We found this rather startling. In the old days, when most men were illiterate, lecturing may have served as the only means of imparting knowledge to the masses, but today it is so closely associated with politicians and propaganda that we were forced to pause and ponder over the utility of the incessant haranguing of these spiritual men! Spirituality is not a mere philosophy: it is a way of life, and to read about it, or to be able to moot its merits and demerits, does not make one a spiritual man. The difference between information gleaned from books and direct knowledge obtained through experience may be compared to the difference between a dream and a reality.

I do not know how many of these eloquent sadhus spoke from direct experience or how much real change they were able to effect in the lives of their audience which was mainly composed of women.

It is well-known that political orators have swayed entire nations with mere eloquence, but a great orator need not necessarily be sincere. Words have a power of intoxicating the speaker himself and a man who speaks too often and too much may be fascinated by the illusion created by his own words. He declaims, indeed, beautifully and powerfully, but he seldom means all he says. In this age of conferences and speeches, diplomacy and courtesy seem to be the two principal factors motivating speech: sincerity is, by and large, out of place. But sincerity is indispensable to the spiritual life. Then, it is also a fact that good speakers appeal to the untrained emotions of the masses rather than to their reason. If spirituality is to impress, mere sentimental fervour cannot be of use to its mission. It was part of the daily programme for most of the pilgrims to go from one camp to another to listen to the different speakers discoursing fluently on various subjects. When I heard people going into ecstasies over the "wonder-

ful talk" of *this* sadhu one morning, and equally excited over the "wonderful talk" of *another* the next evening, and found that the outlook and the teachings of the two were poles apart, I wondered why these erudite sadhus, presumably sincere, took to lecturing as a means of influencing people. Had they a genuine faith in their self-imposed mission, or had the infection of "speeches" found a foothold here, as well?

We should ridicule a layman who tried to air his opinion on Einstein's Theory of Relativity; we should laugh at a novice who criticized the works of Bach or Beethoven. People who do not know anything about sculpture, painting or literature are apt to feel diffident about adjudicating on them; but, strangely enough, although so *few* have any first-hand knowledge of authentic spirituality, so *many* were speaking on the subject here and with the most complacent authority! With a large sweep of the hand they would adjudge a sadhu a fraud or a saint as the case might be. The spectators talked of the pilgrims, while the pilgrims passed judgments in their turn on the sadhus who were the topic of the day. It was interesting small talk, but that was all.

Truth is complex and flexible—not in the sense that it can compromise with falsehood, but in that its answers to life may change with time. This is the only possible explanation of certain puzzling aspects of the sadhus' austerities: their bodies smeared with ash; their long, matted hair; their predilection for caves, or snow-covered mountains; their rigid asceticism, their living on alms and so on.

How far are these things called for in this modern age? Conditions were very different in the olden days when spiritual men not only guided the religious life of our country, but were its accredited social legislators, codifiers of moral laws and the king's counsellers. One of the

objects of the Kumbha Mela used to be to provide opportunities for these men of knowledge to foregather, to discuss things and to initiate social reforms according to the needs of the time. For the rest, they were engaged in conning the scriptures and enriching the wealth of spiritual wisdom by the added testimony of their own experience. All this they held at the service of the country which, in its turn, looked after their material comforts. Now-a-days people are apt to regard sadhus as mere parasites. Nor are they altogether to be blamed, since hundreds of vagabonds and adventurers have taken advantage of the Indian reverence for the sadhu, to adopt sadhuism as a profession. How far, therefore, does it help the evolution of the sincere aspirant to give up the work by which he was maintained, in order to take to begging as a self-discipline?

Though I could not understand the reason why such practices still obtained, nor believe in their utility in the present age, I was filled with a sort of awe. It was easy to abhor the naked man, chanting hymns under the stars, but was it easy to spend the nights in bitter cold, rain, hail and storm? Whatever they were doing, it certainly derived from an aspiration to achieve an ideal. I do not refer now to the mountebanks but to the thousands of sincere aspirants. It was easy to look down upon these for disclaiming the ordinary responsibilities of life, for is not our possessive attachment to our family, home, wealth, fame and good name the primary motivating power of our sense of responsibility and duty? It could not have been easy for them to cast off these attachments. For those who were really sincere it could not even have seemed feasible—unless the call of a higher responsibility had impelled them to do so.

I do not know the use to the world of most of these sadhus still struggling, in lonely retreats, to realise their own souls. But on the other hand, how much good does the

average individual do to the world? The rich may found hospitals and the pious feed a few individuals now and then, or help to heal the sick, but do such activities make any appreciable difference to this vast universe? Man, born for joy, craves joy more than anything else. How then, can those who have no joy or peace give peace and joy to others? The idea of bettering and reforming the world comes from the West. In India the ideal of spirituality has always been to reform or transform one's own nature first. India is a nation of great individuals and some of the greatest personalities who have influenced millions with their glorious lives have seen the light here: Sri Ramakrishna, Swami Vivekananda, Mahatma Gandhi, Rabindranath Tagore, Sri Aurobindo, Sri Ramana Maharishi, Sri Ramdas, Roma Devi—all claimed that it was the spiritual Light that had guided their lives and works.

A great saint, Sri Jai Krishna Giri, told Dada at the Kumbha Mela that in this age of intellectual scepticism it was through sadhus and images that one mostly contacted the Reality. It is said that when the presiding deity of the river Ganga asked the Lord how she could possibly be delivered from the impurities thrown on her by millions of pilgrims, the Lord answered: "You will purify the pilgrims and the sadhus will purify you by bathing in your waters."

Undoubtedly there are sadhus and sadhus. Someone remarked that when one is distraught by howling jackals on the outskirts of the forest one must not forget that these are not the only inhabitants of the jungle, but that the mighty tigers and lions reside there also. We were, indeed, fortunate to have met a few lions among men, great souls who had staked their all to achieve their hearts' ideals, men whose very glance seemed to dissolve all questionings of the restless mind. One of the things that deeply impressed us about these holy men was their unshakable sense of security that did not depend on any extraneous circum-

stances. Nor were they sectarian or narrow in their outlook. Their humility was born of ~~an~~ inner strength, the radiant certitude of their knowledge. Their total detachment from the world was the well-spring of their unselfish love for all mankind. By breaking away from the small circle of their family relationships, they had claimed the whole world for their compassion.

Why they had come to the Kumbha I do not know; all I know is that *we* had gone there with the hope of meeting some great souls and that our quest was amply rewarded.

CHAPTER IV

THE LEGEND OF KUMBHA

IN many of the *Puranas*[1]—not to mention the *Mahabharata*—we find the famous legend of the churning of the ocean. In our scriptures the ocean is taken as a symbol of life in both its aspects: potential and progressively evolving. Its archetype, the Primal Ocean, has been described by our sages as a boundless stretch of hushed waters filling all space, and in which, aeons back, life had lain latent, with the Supreme, Lord Narayana, afloat thereon in *Yoga-nidrā* (extra-cosmic Trance). Then the Trance broke and the One wished to project Himself into multiplicity (*sokāmayata vahu syām prajāyeyeti*).[2] This started the cosmos—in names and forms (*nāmarupa*), vibrations and movements. For exigencies of space it is not possible to develop, far less to improvise speculatively on this mighty theme. Those who are interested may easily turn to the Upanishads, or to the more colourful Genesis of Creation as presented by the *Bhagavat*. All we are directly concerned with here is the post-cosmic picture of the world and the coming into being of the first terrestrial ocean, symbolising life.

But life, once born, had to be helped to grow. So the *Devas* and the *Asuras*,[3] to expedite evolution, conferred together and decided to churn the ocean in order to extract the various boons it held deep-hidden in its womb.

[1]Scriptures and mythological lore.

[2]*Taittiriya Upanishad*, 11, 6.

[3]*Devas* stand for gods or the demi-urges who help our Godward aspiration and *Asuras* stand for demons or the Titans who sponsor those egoistic propensities which lead us ultimately to God-rebelliousness and God-denial.

After the *dramatis personae* comes the drama.

The decision taken, the momentous churning began, the great Mandar Mountain acting as the churning-rod and a colossal python, Ananta Naga, as the rope coiled round it.

Anon the eddies roared and belched forth fumes, gases, fires, electricity and then deadly poison which the Lord of Compassion, Shiva, quaffed in order to rescue the agonised cosmos. Thereafter there emerged, one by one, the beneficent things or boons: the flying horse; the milch cow; the priceless jewel; the magic moon; the sky-chariot; the vibrant lyre; Rambha, the siren; Lakshmi, the paragon of beauty; Vishwakarma, the architect, and so on till, at long last, outflashed Dhanwantri, the divine healer, holding in his arms the last prize: the coveted Kumbha of Nectar (*amrita*) which gave immortality.

As soon as he appeared a great cry of acclamation rang out and the *Devas* and *Asuras* rushed in a frenzy to seize hold of the Kumbha. There are different versions of what happened in the course of the tussle, but we are only concerned here with the one that gave rise to the legend of the Kumbha. It says that when the *Asuras,* thanks to their superior strength, gained final possession of the Kumbha, the beaten *Devas* resorted to ruse: Jayanta, the alert heir-apparent of Paradise, changed himself into a rook and whisked the Kumbha away. Flying over the earth, hotly chased by the robbed, he evaded them now and then so as to be able to take a little rest *en route* to the Elysium and so descended from on high to perch at four places: Prayag, Haridwar, Nasik and Ujjaini. The magic touch of the Kumbha sanctified these for all time and sages, saints and pilgrims started periodically to flock to each of these *tirthas* to celebrate the divine event. Jayanta took twelve days to achieve his flight back to the safety of Paradise; so pilgrims held the festival every twelve years, presumably on the simple computation that what is a day to the gods is a year to mortals.

It is not contended that those who fared duodecennially to the four *tirthas* were persuaded that these had been hallowed because of the touch of the Divine Nectar. All that is suggested here is that it shows up once again an immemorial trend of the Indian mind, namely, to associate all festivities with the Presiding Omnipresent. Of late, many "enlightened" critics have begun to denounce this "inveterate" mythopoeic propensity of ours, branding it all as "sponsoring obscurantism and medieval superstition". Viewed from the unimaginative angle of the cold rationalist, it may, indeed, be so regarded. But contemplated from a deeper standpoint, the perspective changes and the legend emerges as something beautiful and impressive, stimulating and helpful. For it then begins to dawn on us that the mythopoeic faculties of the human mind serve to render it more receptive to the light of those deeper spiritual Truths which cannot find entry into our being when all its windows are choked by fixed preconceptions about what Truth should be. For, in the last analysis, reason is little more than a discriminating faculty which helps us to understand the world of fact by weighing the ponderables and discovering the laws that govern causality. As such, it is doubtless an invaluable instrument which serves us once we know *how* it should be employed. But its utility ceases there, because in fields which are alien to its functioning—as, for example, in the world of imponderables dealt with by the mystics—it can only hamper the explorer, instead of aiding him. As the great seer and saint, Guru Nanak, says: one can drive on *terra firma* in a chariot, but to cross the river one needs a boat. Similarly, he adds, reason may help us part of the way, but when this way leads us—as it must, eventually—through tracts where it can no longer light our path, a more competent guide has to be requisitioned. Our life in this mind-obsessed age has come, however, to be so dominated by the idea of the sovereign competence of reason—which had come to serve but stayed to rule—that even when we find, as we constantly do, that we are *not* growing spiritually

on the starvation-diet prescribed by reason, we pretend to luxuriate in our poverty. And so the credo of the modern Intelligentsia seems to be:

We are taught to extol what fails to inspire
And lured to espouse what yields no thrill:
So our mind, when given fleeting glimpses
Of the Vast, recoils lest they reveal
Ranges beyond the ken of reason,
For these unsettle our mental peace:
We build our citadels hoisting ramparts,
Outlawing, alas, the sky and breeze!
We disclaim the soul's deep visions, forgetting
That finite certitudes must pall,
Till we come to dote on safety's prison,
Condemning the bourneless that brooks no wall.

Our ancients, realising this, never inhibited the native yearning of the soul to turn towards picturesque legends and fables—because they saw that these, by stimulating our imagination, helped enlarge the openings in our psyches to the Flute-call of the Infinite. In India the Prophets of the Beyond—who, indeed, knew what they were talking about—have said with one voice that the more we are reminded of the Infinite, the easier it becomes for us to grow to our full spiritual stature. And so at every step, we find them urging us to strive to link our smallest acts and chores, thoughts and impulses with the Divine. Not for nothing did Lord Krishna enjoin on Arjuna in the *Gita:*

Yat karoshi yadashnāsi yaj-juhoshi dadāsi yat
Yat tapasyasi Kaunteya tat kurushwa madarpanam.

Whatever you feed on or perform
  or give away in charity,
Whenever you worship or aspire—
  all offer, friend, you must to me.

In the realm of the spirit India has never believed in half-measures: even the sense-perceptions must be fulfilled finally in Him and Him alone:

Akshnoh phalam twādrisha-darshanam hi
Tanwāh phalm twādrisha-gātra-samgah:
Jihwā-phalam twādrisha-kirtanam hi
Sudurlabhā bhāgavatā hi loke.

The eyes attain the Goal when Thou art glimpsed,
The body and limbs—when they can touch, Lord, Thine,
The tongue—but when it thrills to sing of Thee:
How rare the souls who are rapt in the Divine!

This is a famous quatrain of the *Bhāgavat.* But not the *Bhāgavat* alone—the gospel of every Sage has been the same, no matter what his persuasion: they all insist that, first and last, one must live on earth for and in the Divine. To give just one more instance—from the Tantra:

Prātarutthāya sāyāhnam sāyāhnāt prātarantatah:
Yat karomi Jaganmātas-tadeva tava pujanam.

Which means:

From dawn to fall of eve—then till the following dawn,
In all I do, World-Mother, I worship Thee alone.

This is no mere formalism, far less dead ritualism, but a living motto and philosophy of life for all who truly aspire to the spiritual life in India: Even our smallest acts and thoughts must be offered to the Divine, whom we are exhorted to remember in every breath we draw—asking nothing, giving everything, working indeed sleeplessly, but with an equable mind, neither elated by success nor depressed by failure. We are told that we have the right only to works, but not to the fruits thereof.[4] This being so, profound legends and parables cannot but prove illuminating, in that, through the vivid and colourful pictures they invoke, the abstract precepts and doctrines that are associ-

[4]*Karmarnyevādhikāras-te ma phaleshu kadachana.....*

ated with them, come to life. I well remember how impressed I was when I first read Sri Ramakrishna's parable about the legendary raven of Bhushundi, the ideal devotee of Rama, who was vowed to repeat his Lord's name all the time. He felt as though he were dying of thirst, but, with water at hand, he could not drink, as that would have meant a break in his repetition of the Name of Rama. There is also the epic story of the great gorilla, Hanuman—another ideal devotee of Rama—who, when asked by some one what the date was, answered that he knew neither of dates of the calendar, nor of months or even years because, meditating exclusively on Rama, he had forgotten everything else. Such stories and legends were favoured by our ancients, for they served the divine purpose of making the ideal a living one by illustrating it through the picturesque personality of a supreme devotee.

But the usefulness of legends does not stop there: they also help to promote our day-to-day concentration on the holiness inherent in things, a fact which we only miss because we lack the deeper vision. This vision cannot of course be had for the asking: it has to be striven for arduously. And here, too, once again, the legends have come to our aid from age to age. For it is partly through these that *shraddhā*, or faith in the holiness that permeates all has been inculcated in India through millenniums, until today it has flowered into the living worship of rivers and lakes, mountains and forests. Take the instance of the river which, to a believer in India, is no mere mass of insentient water-drops speeding blindly towards the sea, but a fecund force which purifies our inner being. Our scriptures say: "*Apo Narayanah,*" that is, water, as the matrix of the universe, is one with the Supreme. A poor pilgrim in Haridwar once admonished me when, inadvertently, I had spat into the Ganga while bathing. "You, a *pilgrim,* must never spit into the Ganga," he said. "For, others may deny, but *you* must accept that the Ganga *is* a

Devi, a Divine Mother, who has been sent to us from Heaven to absolve us from our earthliness." I was startled to realise how living and deep-rooted was our veneration for the Ganga. Millions of men and women who believe in symbols and in their power to turn our consciousness Godward, cherish the Ganga as a superconscient Mother, an emblem of purity—a Mother who is at once human and divine. In the one aspect she gives us physical purity, washing away our dust and sweat; in the other, that inner purity, which purges us of our wrong desires. It is to teach this that our saints and sages have all along enjoined on us to look upon her as the "molten compassion" of the Supreme. One reaps the fruit of one's pilgrimage in the measure of one's veneration for the holy. It is not easy to venerate truly any more than it is to love intensely. One thrills to love only when the sum-total of one's vitality takes a hand. One learns to venerate only when one's powers of imagination and divination unite with one's aspiring will to bow down to the eternal divine principle immanent in the human. These powers lie as latent seeds in all of us, but can come to fruition only in those who have longed sincerely and striven resolutely to develop them with faith and fervour. It has, unfortunately, become a vogue with many of those who think they know, but who really fail to see, to decry all our long-cherished traditions. But traditions are indispensable to the building up, brick by brick, of the steps in human evolution. Reverence for holy symbols and faith in divinity, ensouling even inanimate Nature, have become almost second nature with our spiritual aspirants, because the millennial wisdom of India has fostered the tradition of faith in the divine values, and veneration for all objects as embodiments of the One.

And then, at Prayag, comes the other holy river, the immemorial Yamuna, to meet the hoary Ganga. The union of the

two[5]—the ochre-coloured Ganga associated with Lord Shiva and the blue-flowing Yamuna in whose limpid waters Lord Krishna daily bathed—serves but to enhance the sacredness of the *tirtha* of Prayag which is known as the *Tirtharaj*, the King of *tirthas*, where all the legends about Krishna come to be superimposed on those of Shiva. Is it any wonder that even the poet of poets, Kalidasa, should have immortalised Prayag by stressing its glory—singing in terms of beauty what millions have hymned in their hearts in terms of adoration:

Immaculate Queen! feast now thine eyes on the scene
That opens before thee: where the milk-foamed Ganga
Salutes the sky-blue Yamuna's dancing ripples.
The landscape shimmers even as a gleaming garland
Of cream-hued pearls with sapphires alternating
And there again—in snow-pure lotus-wreaths
Shy blue buds quiver ... And there the spotless swans,
Bound for the trackless Manasa Lake, befriend
The mauve-winged cranes ... And there the ochre-tinted
Bright strands of the earth are dappled with sombre leaves.
And there the inky shadows merge in webs
Of argent moonbeams ... And look, there the blue-
Beckoning skies accost the earth through clouds ...
And lo, our eyes, enraptured, seem to vision
Lord Shiva's vast irradiant Form, bedecked
With sacred ash and girdled by sable serpents!

And then he goes on to describe, in mystic rapture—for our ancients loved to glimpse the godly through the trap-

[5]Perhaps one should say *three*, as Prayag is really the meeting-place of three sacred rivers: Ganga, Yamuna and Saraswati, the trio being hymned as *Tri-veni*, that is, the junction of three currents. The last is often forgotten because her inflow at the confluence is not visible on the surface.

pings of earthly beauty—the time-hallowed message of the confluence:

Samudrapatnyorjala-sannipāte
Putātmanāmatra kilābhishekāt:
Tattwāvabodhena vināpi bhuyas
Tanutyajām nāsti sharira-bandhah.

All pilgrims who bathe at this great confluence
Of the twin rivers, beloved of the deep,
Shall win to the last deliverance on earth:
The wise even as the sinning and ignorant.[6]

[6]From *Raghuvamsa,* Canto XIII, where Rama and Sita are seen flying in the *pushpaka-ratha,* (sky-chariot) and looking down from on high on the panorama.

In five surpassingly beautiful couplets Rama points out to His consort the beauty and glory of the *tirtha.*

CHAPTER V

DOES SPIRITUALITY MEAN BUSINESS?

THE Kumbha Mela, and everything connected with it, brings the two words, spirituality and religion, to the fore. There was a time when religion was synonymous with spirituality, for spirituality ensouls the body of religion; but while ritualism, sectarianism, formalism and even superstition, have helped the body to grow and expand, they have stifled the poor soul so grievously that it has been compelled to desert its original abode and to take refuge in the humble huts of outlawed individuality.

Religion being a collective growth, its strength is measured in terms of numbers, while spirituality only comes to its full flowering in a few blessed individuals. Creeds or dogmas are hardly binding to a true spiritual aspirant. He may or may not follow any specific religion, but if his heart happens to respond to traditional ritualism, then for him every rite can become a living worship and thus cease to be dead formalism, or else he can reject all conventions and yet arrive at his goal—Truth.

It is difficult to gauge how much real spiritual value this traditional holy festival retains today. A tradition is no doubt invaluable, but there is always the danger of a people resting content with dwelling on the nation's past achievements and glories. If a rich tradition does not strengthen the urge to build a richer future, it becomes little better than a rare antique, a museum-specimen stimulating only to the historian and research scholars. The Kumbha Mela might serve to remind us of our marvellous spiritual heritage, but how many of the six million pilgrims assembled there did it inspire to strive for a nobler future?

Spirituality, being an inner growth, cannot be inferred, as can learning or intellectuality, from a man's outward accomplishments. It is one of the most entertaining subjects to talk about and an intelligent man may give the most enlightening discourses on it without ever translating even its rudiments into practice. For a long time, indeed, till the sun of realisation dawns on the spiritual aspirant, or unless he is constantly under the vigilant eye of a Guru, he himself will be the sole judge of his inner attainment. It is hard to judge oneself dispassionately and self-deception is dangerously common.

It is often said in India that women are more spiritual than men. I suppose one of the reasons for the claim is that women have an emotional approach towards most things in life. But when one gets down to essentials, one finds that it is much easier for a man to stake everything for the spiritual ideal. Perhaps this is why even in the fields of Art and Science, so few women have made their mark, for these too require a comparative detachment from worldly ties. Spirituality goes much farther than Art of Science: it demands the whole of one's being, and necessitates the rending of all other bonds. As far as a little prayer and devotions go, women can quite hold their own against men, but when it comes to forfeiting the security and protection of a family and a home, they cannot stand alone so easily—finding it perhaps hardest of all to stake even their good name for an ideal. In any case, these assets are far more necessary to a woman than to a man, especially in India, where women are still so much more dependent on their men-folk than they are in the West. It is true that women are becoming conscious of the fact that no human being has a right to dominate or own another. A woman may belong to her husband and family, but she herself is *not* a chattel: she is a free soul, an individual who is entitled to her own free will. This awakening is no doubt desirable, but so far woman has mostly used her freedom

in emulating the Western ideal of equality. The Indian woman of today claims freedom in matters of marriage, courtship, social equality and the right to snatch her rightful share of happiness out of life. All this is understood and approved by modern society. It is true that in India she has seldom had to fight for her social rights as she had in other countries. For all that, even here, in the land of saint-worshippers—where the Divine Himself is held to be incomplete without His Shakti[1]—she still encounters a great deal of opposition if she proposes to follow the spiritual life. The reason for this resentment is not far to seek: we are always prone to condemn what we do not understand, and how can we understand why it is that one normal human being suddenly wakes up one fine morning to find his or her whole world turning topsy-turvy, all the lesser loves and desires losing their grip, all the accepted modes of pleasure becoming insignificant, all ambitions and hopes turning pale? And all this because of a phantom Call! Can anyone who has not heard this enchanting but terrible Call of the Divine Flutist ever have an adequate notion of its compelling force, a force that wrenches one away from one's cherished anchorage? It is well-known that the mother's love, born as it is of a deep instinctive attachment, is the least selfish of all human loves, but that is precisely why a mother finds it so difficult to sacrifice it for anything in the world. How can one grasp the inexplicable mystery of a greater love that compels a mother to tear herself away even from her children?

I do not know if a woman's inner difficulties of *sadhana* are greater than a man's, but the outward conditions are definitely much harder for her. There are not many exclusively feminine *Ashrams* where she can find refuge and follow her soul's quest, nor is it easy for her to be accepted by a Guru, for it is no light matter for a sadhu, who has

[1]The dynamic aspect of the Divine is represented as feminine, a Creatress.

disclaimed all the responsibilities of the ordinary world, to take the responsibility of a woman's spiritual and physical welfare.

There were 700 nuns at the Kumbha Mela who were attached to the Juna Akhara and who lived in a separate colony. There was a regular stream of women visiting their camp all the time. These nuns had shaven heads and wore long flowing robes. I wonder why so many women who aspire after the spiritual life must outlaw all thoughts of beauty and try to look as unfeminine as possible! Surely He who is the Maker of Beauty, who is All-beautiful Himself, is unlikely—to say the least—to object to a little offering of beauty by His devotees. It may be that this outward renunciation helps women to shed their sex-consciousness. Although these nuns went nowhere, we met a number of enlightened *sadhikas*, including Sri Ananda Mayee Ma who has an aura of simple sweetness about her pure and radiant face. What a great price they had paid for their quest for Truth! For a long time they had met with nothing but censure from the world, yet they had dared to follow this perilous path! It was indeed an inspiration to know, or even to know *about* them.

All this brings us to the fundamental question: Does Spirituality mean business? It is true that among those who aspire only one in a million attains the Goal. But is it not more or less the same in other fields, such as Art, Music, Science? The only difference is that for a spiritual aspirant there can be no compromise. It is a case of all or nothing. This does not mean that the lives of those who have not arrived are futile, for no true aspiration or prayer can be vain; but the thirst for spiritual fulfilment increases with every forward step and no lasting satisfaction can be achieved till the Goal is attained.

It is curious that while all the saints have talked of everlasting bliss, so few have stressed the countless hurdles

which have to be crossed by those who desire this Boon of boons. It is because one hears so much of the peace, purity and liberation, which are to be gained through spiritual discipline, that we see thousands of mediocre men and women turning to this life, to end up by getting hardly anything beyond the joy of a little sentimental emotion which leads nowhere, or to the inertia born of the goody-goody feeling that comes from talking about holy subjects without the least desire to put anything into action. They leave their homes but take all their desires with them; their attachments only change their forms and the ego, instead of dwindling, becomes inflated into a subtle superiority-complex and self-satisfaction. Their feet still wobble on human ground, while their heads grow dizzy in the clouds of illusion and they talk of beautiful experiences as if these were cheap commodities to be had for the asking. Yet can one really blame them? Would any but the strongest have taken to this path if they had been forewarned of the stupendous obstacles that face every aspirant on the way? The hostility of the outside world; the resistance of one's own complex nature; the struggle with one's lower self; the torture of long barren years and last, but not least, the tremendous shock one receives when one sees oneself as one really is, without the trappings of self-deception!

An indomitable will to travel against the current, utterly disregardful of public opinion, is indispensable to attainment for the pilgrims on this path. This requires endless courage because to most of us the opinions of those about us count for not a little. That is why I stood in awe in the presence of the great Illuminates at the Kumbha Mela who, with no parties or popular votes to sustain them, had dared and conquered after having fought their battles all alone. Very few men in this large world can know what these seekers after Truth have gone through, what they have staked, least of all what they have achieved. They have been able to mould the unwilling human clay into some-

thing like perfection. Detached from the world, these few epitomes of Divinity are but beautiful instruments in the hands of the Master! Whether the Kumbha Mela has served any other purpose or not, it has brought to millions the coveted opportunity of coming into contact with convincing and heart-warming greatness. It made it possible even for me—who, unlike my Dada, am without a native power of veneration—to be blessed by the Vision of such true Visionaries.

CHAPTER VI

THE MYTHOLOGY OF KUMBHA

It is a striking fact that the great mystics of India have all loved to speak in parables and fables and dearly cherished our ancient legends. In the Kumbha Mela many of the saints and sages seemed to rejoice in following this ancient tradition: they constantly enlivened their discourses to the populace with stories and tales—canonical as well as apocryphal—to bring home to their audience the inner imports and implications of time-old spiritual injunctions and precepts. Then there are the *Puranas,* whose authors requisition mythology to popularise philosophy at every turn. Many of these tales are as interesting as they are revealing. Because of exigencies of space, however, we must make do with only two as relevant to our theme: one from the life of a saintly priest and the other an illuminating parable.

To preface the first.

Millions of those who go on pilgrimage to the Kumbha Mela are drawn by one or both of two prospects: coming into contact with the rare sadhus and bathing in the time-hallowed rivers. Let us examine the call of each separately.

The sadhus have been panegyrised in almost all our scriptures as the *élite* among men, the very salt of the earth. The *Mahabharata* has it that one of the most scheming race of Demons—the *Kalakeya Asuras*—once conferred together in a secret session of the demoniac Parliament to think up

the quickest and surest way of extirpating humankind and resolved:

Lokā hi sarve tapasā dhriyante
Tasmāt taraddhwam tapasah kshayāya.

That is:

All the worlds are sustained by the Spirit's Sun:
So hasten to kill off those who invoke Its light.

But although the *modus operandi* decided upon was drastic enough in all conscience, the diagnosis that inspired it was as sound as only the Devil's could be, in that it stemmed from an unerring perception, namely:

Ye santi kechichcha vasundharāyām
Tapaswino dharmavitashcha tajnāh:
Teshām vadhah kriyatām kshiprameva
Teshu pranashteshu jagat pranashtam.

Which means:

Wherever, on earth, you meet the saints or sages,
Or the wise, or those who are versed in the Spirit's lore
Slay them forthwith: for once they are extinct,
Terrestrial life shall also cease to be.

We have been told time and time again, that the sober fact that the life and soul of human aspiration is sustained by our spiritual men can be verified here and now by any aspirant who will approach them with the true humility of a seeker. For then he is sure to experience for himself how their dynamic power, bordering on the miraculous, can compass an instant spiritual awakening—sometimes by a single touch, at others even by a glance. And it is because hundreds have attested this in their lives and been swiftly delivered from their seemingly irremediable destiny of suffering that, even today, millions of restless men and women run to the few who have achieved this godlike power. The cock-sure rationalist with his superior smile

may, indeed, summarily explain away this popular impulse as fathered by superstition on the one hand and escapism on the other. (How facile are, sometimes, the explanations of Reason with its clichés casting more shadows than light!) But just as the sophisticated are not always as wise as they seem, the simple are not always as undiscerning as they look. Those who win something from their contacts with the holy *know* what they receive, which those who have not received can seldom so much as imagine. In other words, it is only when people get something they value that they can bring themselves to pay for it. It is an indisputable fact that millions of men and women in India—and many among them very worldly-minded at that—are to be found, even today, ready not only to undergo great hardships, but to run grave dangers, by thronging to the Kumbha Mela in order just to be able to contact the sadhus or to bathe at the confluence. We met a great many pilgrims at Prayag, who believed in the absolving power of the Ganga and the spiritual power of the holy to purify them from the day-to-day stains that must accrue to almost all in worldly living. This faith has been fostered by our scriptures, too, which serve but to persuade them to cherish it the more. To give a typical instance: in Canto I of the *Bhagavat* it is written:

Deep purity thou canst attain
When thou comest to bathe again and again
In the Ganga: but when thou wilt meet
The sages, havened at His feet,
Their presence shall deliver thee,
In a flash, from all impurity.

Countless stories and fables, parables and allegories are in common currency in India to encourage this faith in the sanctity of those saints who held the Lord "dearer than children, dearer than wealth, dearer than all else."[1] In

[1] *Preyah putrāt preyo vittāt preyonyasmāt sarvasmāt*
......Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, 1-4-8.

illustration of how the appeal of the devotee can actually constrain the Divine to serve him, numberless tales, historical or otherwise, have been related throughout the ages. The *Bhagavat* even goes so far as to say that the Lord Narayana told the sage, Durvasa (Part IX, Canto 4):

> Devoted to my devotee,
> I'm not free—but depend
> On him who depends on me alone
> As his one guide and friend.
>
> I live for ever in his soul
> Who loves me more than life
> And gives up all for my dear sake:
> His children, home and wife.
>
> My soul to him for ever belongs
> As his soul belongs to me:
> How can I not seek him who seeks
> Me everlastingly?
>
> As a spouse becomes a slave to his
> Good spouse who slaves for him,
> Even so, I bow to him who bows
> To me as the Supreme.

One need feel little diffidence in saying that such a moving human pledge, given by the Lord Himself, would be inconceivable to any mystic not born and bred on the holy soil of India. For India is the land of Krishna, the peerless Divine Incarnation who came down to earth to play at hide and seek with humans, accepting almost all their modes, yet manifesting through His unfathomable rhythms of beauty and bliss the message of the deepest Divine intimacies, the last secrets, thus guaranteeing as it were, that the Supreme will literally wait upon His devotees if they but hold Him "dearer than the dearest."[2] If I had space, I could give many a startling instance of the Lord's

[2] *Preshthah preyasāmapi*......The Bhagavat.

fulfilment of this pledge, given for all time, and how, in the last resort, He has performed sheer miracles when nothing short of these could rescue the devotee in his hour of need. And then there are the authentic stories of the saintly devotee coming miraculously in his turn to succour those who called out to him in despair. For it is written that those who have taken refuge in Him, body and soul, attain through His Grace a semi-divine power to give refuge to the derelict.[3] But as it is not possible, nor advisable, in this our intellectual age, to dwell too much on such miracles as have been brought about by faith, only one such instance, claimed to be authentic, is given below to illustrate how the Divine redeems His pledge to the true devotee.

There was, once upon a time, a saintly Vaishnava devotee called Devah who lived in a temple of Krishna. It was a private temple owned by the Prince of Udaypur who had employed Devah as a priest when the latter was a mere stripling. The young man had grown old with the passage of years and one night, after a strenuous day, he stretched himself near the threshold of the temple. It was close upon midnight but still he went on repeating the Lord's name, holding in his arms meanwhile a lotus-garland which had hung round the neck of the Image all day. Now it so happened that on that night the Prince, feeling somewhat restless, took it into his head to visit the shrine in order to pray. At his sudden appearance the priest sprang up in some alarm. The Prince smiled reassuringly and told him that he had only come to get a garland of the Lord for the night, whereupon Devah offered him the one he held in his arms. The other was about to put it on his head when he noticed a grey hair on one of the flower-petals. Annoyed, he rebuked the priest for his remissness.

"You are old enough to know, my man," he said, "that you should never have allowed your own hair to creep into a garland of the Lord."

[3]*Twamashritā hyāshrayatām prayānti*......The Chandi.

In a sudden access of fear the poor priest lost his head.

"It is not my hair, master," he pleaded, "but the Lord's own."

"How can that be?" demanded the other angrily. "Surely, the Lord, being eternally young, cannot have a grey hair on his head!"

"He was in-indeed young once, master," faltered out the poor old man without thinking. "But in the last thir— forty years the Lord too has g-grown nearly as old as myself."

"You are a liar and you know it," thundered the other. "But I will say no more tonight. I will come tomorrow morning and see for myself. If the Lord's hair is grey now as you claim, I will let it pass—if not, you shall come here no more."

The poor old priest, left alone with the Image of the Lord, felt disconsolate and appealed to Him, in tears:

"I told a lie in sudden fear: a sinner I am, forsooth!
So 'tis but meet I be disgraced for having slipped from Truth.
Punish me as Thou will—but Oh, how shall I bear the pain
Of being expelled from Thy shrine, Lord, and seeing Thee never again?
I have lived for Thee alone and known Thee as my All-in-all:
The world grew alien, savourless—the day I heard Thy Call.
I dread not shame nor dire dishonour and can as an outcaste live:
But exiled from thy Presence, Love—Oh, how shall I survive?"

Singing pleading songs like this, the suppliant, in utter exhaustion, fell asleep, towards the small hours of the morning and dreamed that the Lord Himself was bending over him, smiling and singing:

"But how could you lie, O my dear friend—you, who have loved me so?

With years the darkest hair, too, must turn grey—who does not know?

You came here first, remember, when we both were in our prime:

Our locks then shone deep black, but forty years is a long long time!

So how could you have sinned by saying: 'The Lord, too, has grown old?'

Not a hair remains now on my pate but is snow-white—behold!"

In sheer ecstasy, he woke up, at dawn, just when the Prince was ascending the steps of the temple accompanied by his retinue.

A pencil of golden rays from the morning-sun fell aslant on the Image of the Lord and lo, they were all stupefied: a miracle had supervened overnight!—the head that had been young all these years, hung with ink-black curls, had now grown old and the hair had turned completely white! The Prince looked at the priest in incredulous amazement. In a voice choked with tears, Devah made a clean breast of everything and wound up with the message of the dream. The Prince, deeply moved, fell at his feet which he kissed and said: "How blessed am I to have a priest whose honour my Lord holds even dearer than his own young hair!"

Such is the famous story from life; one of many that are still related to illustrate how the Divine can and does accept subservience to his true devotees. The rationalist will doubtless dismiss it all as myth. I can only say that I, personally, do not find such interventions at all incredible, for, together with others who happened to be present, I have myself witnessed divine miracles not less unfathomable. Not that the spiritual aspirant in India accepts these because he has himself seen similar miracles of Divine Grace, nor even because of their authenticity or historicity: he accepts them because, in the first place, such stories have an innate capacity to move his heart and to be so moved, as he knows, is always of good augury; in the second place, because such a spontaneous acceptance, prompted by simple humility, helps to open the inner vision, the second sight, to which alone are given glimpses of the deeper truths. And it is because it does so help that such supraphysical visions and experiences are accorded to those who are ripe for them and can profit by them, to wit, those whose faith has grown luminous enough to be able to light their path. Vis-à-vis such instances of Divine intervention, the true devotee's position, necessarily humble, can be summed up very simply thus: "What can the Lord not do if He so wills? Therefore how can I presume to disbelieve the saints (who have testified to divine miracles) on the ground that I, or most people, know nought of them? How can the evidence of those who *have* seen be questioned by those who have *not?*" This attitude of humble acceptance, as against that of judicial enquiry, has been unreservedly undersigned by the seers and saints of India because it is through humility and acceptance that one wins soonest to the deeper vision without which none may hope to find a clue to the deeper secrecies of Grace. So have our saints and sages thought fit to present such stories to their audience, thereby educating their faith, as well as making it easier for them to grow spiritually through their increased

receptivity to the higher truths, ignoring those who continue to be unresponsive to the voice of faith and vowed to resist them more and more.

The sturdy rationalist of to-day finds it only too easy to prick the bubble of the ancients' reputed wisdom with the facile prod of ridicule. Their arguments and battle-cries are, indeed, loud in the land: The day of miracles is past. The Creator of the universe. (if such an Entity really exists) should be better employed than with putting His credulous devotees in a hole and then extricating them from it. This world of ours is, after all, governed by the iron laws of *karma* and causality and not by the arbitrary whimsies of a Supreme Muddler whose sorry *mess* can only be hailed as the handiwork of a baffling wisdom by those who refuse to outgrow ancient superstitions. Faith in religion or symbols, which is little better than animism, is surely outmoded in this our age of an enlightened Reason which is capable of explaining everything. It is high time we disowned day-dreams and faced up to a life which is obviously grim and earnest. Oh, the folly of banking on a phantom Saviour and petitioning wishful thinkers, who pose as wisdom's deputies, for a passport to a fool's paradise! ... and so on and on.

Yes, it is easy enough to raise a laugh by the casting of cheap flings at faith and easier still to "debunk" the holiness of "medieval saints meditating on their heads" or "quixotic ascetics concentrating on their navels." It is easy, because the mysterious power of true holiness is not intended to be demonstrated rationally to all and sundry here and now, far less tested in scientific laboratory to be labelled valid or invalid as the case may be. But then, as Lowes Dickinson, the great English rationalist, confessed after his final disillusionment: "Nothing that is important can be proved by reason." Add also that, unfortunately for the rationalist, miracles still happen when they do serve a purpose in the Divine Scheme, and that the Lord's Flute can still be heard

by those who sincerely aspire to be weaned from the *maya* of appearances and to be granted an asylum in the heart of Reality—the only asylum that abides in this our fool world of make-believe and shadow-dance. But in order to perceive this, one must first acquire the *divya-chakshu* and *divya-shruti,* that is to say, the eyes that can see over the horizon and the ears that can hear beyond the din. For this, say those who *know,* a willing acceptance of the holiness which presides at the heart of things, added to a living worship of the godliness which manifests itself through men who have walked with God, is not only not a false direction-post, but can act as one of the most dependable of search-lights leading us out of the wood of human ignorance.

To come to river-bathing now or, to be more precise, bathing in those rivers which have been proclaimed by the sages, the saints and the scriptures as eminently capable of promoting our aspiration and spiritual fervour.

Of all the religious beliefs which men cherish in India, perhaps the most Indian—that is, the one which obtains in no other clime but ours—is this die-hard faith of ours in the sacredness of our rivers. Among these stands out the peerless Ganga, the holiest of the holy, who has held a magic fascination for the Indian mind, unparalleled in the history of man's spiritual evolution. The nearest is, probably, the pious Christian's veneration for the waters of the holy Jordan. But even he will hardly go to the length of deifying it, as we Indians deify our immemorial Ganga. To this very day hymns are sung in glorification of her divinity which has not only attracted millions of Indian hearts throughout the ages but in so powerful a way as to be all but incomprehensible to a non-Indian. I well remember the typical case of my father, Dwijendralal Roy (a famous poet, dramatist and satirist, who revelled in lampooning almost every brand of religiosity which smacked of the superstitious and sanctimonious) falling under the spell of the irresistible Ganga and composing a most moving hymn-

on her which he used to sing with exquisite fervour. The closing lines of this lovely song, which has made hundreds shed tears of ecstasy, may be translated thus:

When my life's little day, O Mother, comes to an end
And, wistful, I wait upon eternity,
May thine unfailing Grace on me descend
On the eyes in sleep, on the ears in melody.
Redeem my restless soul with Thy deep peace
And my limbs, O Ganga, with Thy nectarous bliss.

I do not think that any poet who is not an Indian could ever compose such a soulful hymn to a river, nor invoke her so movingly as an incarnation of Divine Grace come to purify earthlings. And then take the case of one of the Parnassians of the pure spirit, the Formless Brahman, appealing to the divine compassion of the same stream:

Bounteous Ganga, hyaline!
Sustaining all, O Mother Divine!
Whose immemorial waters hymn
The Vedas—come Thou to redeem
My ignorance, sin, world-weariness
By Thy celestial caress.
O molten paradise, song-serene!
My haven be in this world of din.
My dark illumine with Thy Grace,
Agleam with love's own loveliness.[4]

It is fatally easy to pooh-pooh such mystic outpourings of the wistful heart as being mere poetic hyperbole inspired by an animist tradition erected on a basis of superstition and fantasy. But a tradition can retain its validity only when it is nurtured with the heart's steadfast faith in the

[4]I have translated here from the great Shankaracharya's celebrated Sanskrit hymn, only a few lines of which are somewhat amenable to translation. I have had to omit some of the loveliest images because these entail associations which no English words can convey.

testimony of the heart. It follows, therefore, that those who, holding all such testimony suspect, find the tradition sterile, must be adjudged incompetent to assess its import. For while experience can understand and pass judgement on no-experience, the converse is not true and for the simple reason, which is daily attested by life, that one cannot *know* an experience for what it is till one has had it. One can, indeed, imagine it from what one knows, but, just as a child cannot possibly imagine from his knowledge of juvenile affection the nature of marital love, so one can hardly imagine the mystical raptures from one's knowledge of mundane pleasures. Put differently, if a little trenchantly, while from a higher plane an observer can see what is happening on a lower one, he cannot glimpse from a lower level what is happening on the higher. Mahatma Gandhi has said very appositely: "There are subjects where reason cannot take us far and we have to accept things on faith. Faith then does not contradict reason but transcends it. Faith is a kind of sixth sense which works in cases which are beyond the purview of reason." In other words, while the man of faith can well understand the findings of reason, the man of reason can never understand those of faith. Hundreds and thousands of spiritually-minded people, not to mention the top-ranking mystics, have vividly experienced the purifying power of bathing in the Ganga. They *know* what they have experienced through the receptivity of faith. Those who do not own this faith must, naturally, miss the shock of this experience since faith here acts rather like a conductor through which the shock is conveyed. Consequently it is irrational on the part of those who are insulated against faith to question the testimony of those others who have been given to see because they were *not* so insulated. These are no mere words, since true faith must lead to Vision and therefore the man of faith *can* claim that his house *is*, ultimately, built on a rock, the rock of experience. Nevertheless, it must always be borne in mind that it is faith which creates

the conditions and the milieu in which the experience can come; scotch the faith and you are left where you were: in the void of no-experience. But as enough is enough, I will conclude this rational defence of the seemingly irrational with a famous parable which is as beautiful as it is profound, hoping that it will make my meaning a little clearer.

Once upon a time, Lord Shiva with His divine consort, Parvati, was watching from on high the celebration of the Kumbha Mela at Haridwar. Millions of pilgrims had come to bathe in the Ganga and there was universal jubilation as the rumour was abroad that anyone who bathed in the holy river at that auspicious hour was going to become, at one bound, emancipated from the bondage of sin and so would attain liberation—*moksha.* "Victory to Shiva, the Lord of divine compassion!" sang everybody. As Parvati brooded on the scene, a sudden cloud came over her face. She heaved a sigh and turned to Shiva. "You are, indeed, compassionate, my Lord," she said. "Only I wonder whether such compassion has not done more harm than good. For when you were pleased to ordain that those who bathe in the Ganga to-day should all become sinless and win *moksha* straightaway, you cannot have stopped to think how many millions of impenitent sinners might exploit your compassion. When you make *moksha* so cheap that it can be had for a mere dip in a river, do you not indirectly encourage sin? Alas, my Lord," she added, sighing again, "now that they know that *moksha* can be had for the asking, who but a fool will take the trouble to lead a virtuous life on this earth, far less to practise noble austerities?"

Shiva smiled and said: "Well, do let us pay a visit to earth and see for ourselves, on the spot, how things are. For then perhaps we shall be in a better position to judge." And they came to an understanding about the way in which the investigation should be carried out.

Shiva, disguised as a Brahmin, lay prone on the bank of the Ganga simulating death. Parvati, disguised as his wife, sobbed disconsolately. The pilgrims who were passing in a file, stopped, one after another, to enquire of the beautiful widow how her husband had died and if there was any way in which they might help.

"There is only one thing," she made answer to them all. "Lord Shiva has decreed that if there is anyone here who is wholly sinless, a single touch from him will restore my husband to life. But if the person is *not* sinless, he will die instantly."

Everyone who heard this pulled a long face and slunk away shaking his head and Parvati went on crying her heart out till a semi-drunken man, who was on his way to the Ganga to bathe, happened to pass that way. Seeing her, he stopped dead and, upon asking what was wrong, was given the same answer.

As soon as he grasped the meaning of the message, his face lit up and, without a moment's hesitation, he said:

"But then, Mother, why should you cry? Don't you see that I am here? True, I have sinned all my life by getting drunk, but now I am going to have my dip and then, cleansed of all my sins. I will come back in the twinkling of an eye, I assure you. And then, ah then, I will just touch your husband back to life. Weep no more."

With this he made for the Ganga, singing in joy:

If the great Lord Shiva will so ordain:
    A drop shall hold the deep
And a tortoise will outrace the deer:
    Yet, seeing not, we fools weep!

As he sang on, his joy flowered out into ecstasy. He dived into the Ganga saying: "Beware Mother! Must keep faith with me now—you can't let me down, you know!"

He returned radiantly to Parvati who was still weeping. "What? Weeping still?" he asked reprovingly. "Nay, rejoice, Mother, rejoice! Lord Shiva's Ganga has made me sinless—and now, behold—I perform the miracle, victory to Lord Shiva!"

He laughed and bent down to touch the dead man—when, lo, he saw, thrilled, Shiva himself stood upon the spot where the dead body had been!

"You have, indeed, attained sinlessness and *moksha,* my son," He said smiling, blessing the other, "and so far *only* you!"

"How now, my great Sentinel?" Shiva asked Parvati when they returned to their heavenly abode on the Kailasa. "With all my Divine compassion and authority, I do not seem to have succeeded in making *moksha* so very cheap, after all, have I?"

CHAPTER VII

THE HOUR BEFORE THE DAWN

I SAW her first in a gathering of sadhus where Dada was singing devotional songs. She was an exotic-looking woman in her early thirties. Even her simple ochre-coloured robe and her *chandan tika* on the forehead could not hide the fact that she somehow did not belong there. I wanted to know something about her and what I gathered roused my curiosity. They said she came from a well-to-do family. Just a few years back she had been living the life of the typical modern woman who revelled in ball-rooms, parties, clubs, riding, swimming, social work and so on, when, suddenly, something happened to her and she let down her poor husband, children and a host of admirers by throwing up everything and going away. There were broad hints of sly motives behind this seemingly whimsical behaviour on her part. Some critics, a trifle more generous than others, spoke commiseratingly of hidden frustrations. Those who had known her well in her palmy days found her conduct even more reprehensible: she had behaved in a hard-hearted and selfish way, it was irresponsible, inexcusable—almost an outrage on Hindu society—and so on. I set myself the task of finding out her true story. Her face haunted me.

She was living in a small hut on the bank of the Ganga. I went there one morning and told her very humbly that it was not a justification nor even an explanation that I wanted, but that I had sincerely felt that to win an inkling into the inner state of an aspirant might help me and a few others, like myself, who were trying to follow an identical path.

She sat still awhile, a far-off look in her lovely, brooding eyes. Her face betrayed marks of a great strain and world-weariness. When she spoke there was an undertone of subdued pain in her voice.

"You must have noticed," she said, "how real dreams seem while one is dreaming. One lives vividly every moment of the dream and simply cannot doubt it: but the moment one wakes up one knows that all that was not real —not true. I, too, woke up one day—as though from a dream: only the awakening this time was gradual and, to my astonishment, I found that the *reality of life* was becoming a dream and some dreamlike *intangibility* was slowly becoming the only reality."

She paused for a little, then almost wistfully resumed.

"Mine had been an ordinary life," she said, "with its little joys and sorrows, ups and downs. Born with a hyper-sensitive temperament ever since I was a child, a kind smile, a small frown, even a stray harsh word would leave a lasting impression on my mind. At the same time, I was gifted with a deep vitality and a native capacity to wrest a great deal out of life, so that I never found the world a bit dull. Everything I touched yielded me wonder and joy. Only two things troubled me deep down and I often ponder-ed over them: the hollowness of social relationships and the precariousness of human love. I began to find that life consisted mostly of reactions: we were all the time reacting to situations in general and people in particular. We were not masters of ourselves, others had so much power to give us joy or to make us suffer, though the power to create joy was given to very few indeed. I discovered also, to my cost, that those who were nearest to us could cause us most misery and hamper us at every step. Why things should be as they obviously were I did not understand and found it hard to believe that they had been meant to be so. But then, I asked myself, were we born to stay mere puppets

whose only function was to react helplessly and unconsciously to the different pulls of strings held in different hands? This poignant question I could not answer and it became like a gnawing pain in my heart, bringing in its wake a feeling of unaccountable loneliness. When the ordinary modes of pleasure lost their savour, I tried to drown my ennui in social works of all kinds. This gave me partial relief for a while, but then presently it dawned on me that very little good was being done by all these conferences, resolutions and the fashionable hobby of "bettering the world". The gloom only grew deeper and there was a void within that nothing from without could fill. I was at the crossroads of destiny, and the inner struggle, the implications of which I could not grasp, reversed my reactions to things —when, for good or for ill, I saw clearly that my world had changed overnight. There was hardly any desire on anyone's part to understand my genuine difficulties. Those who could have held me at that time with kindness only thrust me farther away from them with their hard intolerance. It was almost as if a barterer were suddenly to find all friendly doors closing on his face just because he had no goods to offer to the market of this world. Nevertheless a strange pull from some hidden recesses deep down was gradually weaning me from my anchorage.

"Gently, like a tender rose-bud opening its shy petals to the sun, a sweet love blossomed in my heart: love for the dream—Reality, a yearning for a Beloved I knew so little about! A faint but persistent voice of silence whispered of His glorious attributes. A new vista unfolded itself before my eyes. A strange love that gives all without counting the cost, that offers without bargaining and yet is dependable—such a love became a possibility.

"But the conditions were hard," she continued, "for one did not *fall* in love with this Elusive Beloved but had to *rise* to His love—to make an all-out endeavour to outgrow one's lower self. There was no question any more of choice,

since none of this was of my own seeking. He had chosen me—yes, even me, who had never so much as asked whether He was worth searching for! His flawless Grace had descended on one full of flaws, a person egoistic and self-willed and swayed by moods of all descriptions! When I thought of this unbelievable Grace, for the first time in my life, I felt humble—truly humble. But one thing was becoming progressively clear to me: Grace involved responsibility."

She paused and reflected for a little with bowed head. I looked away. A cloud had come over the sun. She also gazed at it absently. Then suddenly she began again.

"This was only the beginning of the end," she said. "For the Grace that had descended on me took the form of a deep *vairagya.* All that was mine I wanted no more. though what I really wanted I was yet to know. All that had given me joy had dwindled into insignificance but was not yet replaced by anything else. The dream was broken but I woke up to find myself in utter emptiness, with just an incipient glimpse of a Great Possibility. I felt like a stranger who stands bewildered on the frontier of an alien country and finds, to his consternation, that he has not come with the proper visa and so cannot enter the territory."

She paused again and drew a sigh. Then, looking me straight in the face, she went on:

"In that dark hour before the dawn, I met my Guru. I had seen many a great man in my life, but never had I met a man with such great qualities of transparent sincerity and truthfulness. The better part of myself knew at once that this was my only chance. I felt that if I clung to the feet of such a truth-seeker I was bound to arrive some day at the portals of Truth. Something within told me that this was the channel through which the light would come to dispel my darkness. It is not easy to do the will of the Lord, or even to be aware of it, but if I could learn to do

the will of one who knew His will, it would purify me by effacing my self-will. This was my second lesson in humility." She smiled pensively to herself and resumed: "My Guru saw through me and knew where my weakness lay. He said nothing to discourage me, but it was obvious to me that he wanted to travel light. Anyway he resisted with all his might. But I, too, had seen his greatness and therefore held on to him with all the obstinacy of my nature. I won.

"The Grace of my master descended on me and I was accepted. But as I have said before: Grace must involve responsibility.

"So this was by no means the end of my struggle which only emerged now in a new form. All those months I had been doing battle with the outside world and just when I was about to capitulate in utter exhaustion, my Guru pointed out bluntly that these fights were but pin-pricks compared with the assaults that were going to be launched by and by from within. One is not expected to change others, he added, but change oneself one must. I accepted it, but found that it was not enough to surrender what one had, but that one must be set on surrendering what one *was*—which is much more difficult. At every turn the ego contests the ground furiously—even the smallest recalcitrance takes ages to quit. At every bend my self-will asserted itself against the wiser will of the Guru. The pride with which I had claimed that I was ready and strong enough to take all risks, even face public obloquy to follow this path, quivered with every blow I received. It was only the Guru's strength and the Divine Grace that sustained me every time I quailed.

"My people blamed me, but strove hard to induce me to return. But I had gone too far to turn back. Also, whenever I looked back in my moments of weakness, I always found that the past loomed like a dream and one can't very well recapture a dream."

She sighed and suddenly held me with her eyes.

"Do you know the anguish of a mother's heart when the pull is strong enough to draw her away from her children yet cannot bring itself to snap the bonds of attachment? Can you imagine what a mother goes through when she sees her innocent children being used as baits to teach *her* lessons? She sees this helplessly, yet knows that the solution lies in propitiating God--not man. It is not the indignities that cause the pain but the blows to our various attachments.

"One thing alone came out into bold relief with the passing of time: no pain or temptation can deter one from one's path if the call is genuine. With every lapse, the determination to rise again grows stronger. The aspiration to follow the lead of the Guru is like a flame that may flicker often enough in face of the storms that rage outside and within, but that burns steadily brighter every time.

"A Guru's love for the disciple comes nearest to the Divine Love, in that he, too, wants nothing but the disciple's own welfare. He does not discard you because of your shortcomings, nor judge you by your failings: he appraises you only by your aspiration for the Light of Truth. That is why for the disciple, he becomes a symbol of the Divine.

"I do not know how far I have progressed in my quest or whether I shall ever arrive or shall perish on the way. All I know is that clinging to the hand of my Guru I walk on and that neither joy nor sorrow matters any more. Let the world say what it will, let the heavens shower their blessings of compassion or deal their thunders of doom—I walk on till I arrive or fall. I would much rather follow this path and drop off unfulfilled on the way than succeed signally in any lesser sphere of life."

She could say no more, for her voice was choked with emotion. She had given me enough food for thought. I

thanked her silently with a warm hand-clasp. As I left her I could not help but wonder how little we knew of those whom we judged, and how different things could be from what they seemed on the surface! How many aspirants there must be in the Kumbha Mela who, like her, are trudging on, unnoticed, or misunderstood, fighting their battles alone, struggling to conquer—not the world, but themselves!



CHAPTER VIII

THOUGHTS ON KUMBHA

MEN react differently to life. So life, in its turn, answers back, conveying different messages and lessons to men which vary with each according to his temperament and receptivity. This being so, one person's outlook on life can never coincide at all points with that of another because every spectator views the objective world from his own unique angle of vision, which is never quite the same as that of another. The outlook of each one is finally determined by his time, milieu, *samskaras*[1] and stage of evolution the sum total of which goes to make up his personality. An underlying unity of perceptions does, indeed, bind the various outlooks together, but along with this common factor—which is too patent to be seriously disputed—a difference must also exist. As a result, the needs or impressions of no two persons can be completely identical or conterminous. The millennial wisdom of India has never failed to take stock of this seeming paradox that one Truth can evoke in different recipients different responses which at once complement and contradict one another. Realising this, India has never thought of recommending a universal religion for all but has counselled every seeker to walk by a different path to the same Goal: Life Divine. More explicitly, while the way out of bondage prescribed to one person is distinct from that recommended to another, the last Liberation or Mergence *is* the same for both. Sri Ramkrishna illustrated this by a beautiful analogy when he said: "The good mother decides upon a different regimen for each of her children: to her adult son she gives rich sweets, to her little child simple rice, to

[1]Vide GLOSSARY.

her baby in arms milk, to her ailing daughter barley-water. But her love is not measured in terms of the nutritive value or delectable savour of the several diets. To each according to his need—is her motto. So it is with the World Mother who directs each of us to follow a path or *sadhana* whose nature is conditioned by the pilgrim's temperament, native capacity and *samskāra*."

Thus a universal religion or tonic for the soul was never deemed wise or even practicable by our ancients, and, as a result, we Hindus have taken spontaneously to that religious toleration for which our scriptures and saints were primarily responsible. To give but one instance. In a memorable couplet in the *Bhagavat,* Sati, the great consort of Lord Shiva, admonishes her unwise father, Daksha who criticised her husband's eccentric ways intolerantly:

Yathā gatir-Deva-manushyayoh prithak
Swa eva dharme na param kshipet sthitah

Men walk one way and gods along another:
So he who treads the path he loves, prescribed
By his own *dharma,* must beware of carping
At others who would arrive by different paths.

A few aberrations apart, even the most ardent votaries of any Hindu cult have always looked without disapproval on those who have followed another. Hence dogmatic or credal differences in India have never led to religious persecution or to anything resembling the Inquisition. We have believed in the caste system, but never in crusades. So we find that even a confirmed scoffer and atheist like Charvaka, who, as a ruthless heretic and iconoclast would have been burnt at the stake in medieval Europe, has been ranked among our sages (*munis*). This large toleration has made it possible in India for utterly irreconcilable ways of life and modes of faith to be able to live side by side harmoniously—a fact which has been belauded even by those

Westerners who have disapproved of our caste system or polytheism.[2] The Hindu has never believed in domination by means of one dogma, one creed, one faith, not to mention the laying down of one law of salvation for all, here and now. Not that the follower of a faith or philosophy ever felt misgivings on the score of his power to help others to attain, but having grown up in the genial climate of religious toleration, he came, spontaneously, to respect the feeling of others in regard to their beliefs and tenets. What Dr. Radhakrishnan has said on the subject must raise an echo in every Indian heart: "Toleration is the homage which the finite mind pays to the inexhaustibility of the Infinite." The Vedas have been at great pains to provide us with the mystico-philosophical sanction for this inexhaus-

[2]Nobody to-day will seriously support the contention that the caste system should continue in its present degraded form, that is to say, on the basis of untouchability. But the caste system in India, as advocated by our sages, was very different, both in its functioning and outlook. The sages saw that men belonged broadly to four main types and that these were indicated by their temperaments and modes of living. There were the Brahmins, the spiritual men, who were the law-givers and upholders of the highest human aspirations: the Kshatriyas, the administrators and warriors who governed and defended the land under the Brahmin's guidance: the Vaishyas, who were the merchants and producers of the country's wealth: and lastly, the Shudras, the men who supported with their manual labour the whole structure of society. Millenniums have passed, but we find that all over the world men still more or less follow these four clear-cut vocations. What the ancients disapproved of was an intermixture of these four types, because they perceived that man cannot do well a task for which he is not temperamentally fitted. With the passage of time, the caste system degenerated into what it is to-day, but that does not mean, as is held by the ultra-modern on the ground that all men are born equal, that the original version of it was faulty. This is not the place in which to combat so superficial a view, nor to lay stress on the enormous service that the caste system has rendered to Hindu society. There can, indeed, be no question, at the present time, that it should be modified in accordance with contemporary needs. But even before we do that, we should first learn what exactly we must change and why. So also with polytheism, for, since the gods have been created by the Creator and can therefore be experienced and invoked by those who know how, it is idle to wish them away simply because Reason cannot find a niche for them in its scheme!

tibility and multiplicity, which they enjoin on us to respect and welcome, rather than contemn and combat.

The *Katha Upanishad* has put it succinctly (2.2.12):

> The Unique, ensouling all that is, seeks birth
> To project the One into endless forms on earth:
> None but the wise who vision Him in their hearts
> Attain the flawless bliss which never departs.

The Kumbha Mela epitomizes this Truth in the amazing spectacle it presents of multifarious creeds and beliefs, ways of aspiration and modes of self-discipline. To go there with one's eyes open is to be deeply impressed by the unity which underlies and sustains the breath-taking diversity of faiths and precepts, doctrines and philosophies followed by the various denominations of sadhus congregated there. In fact one cannot suppress a feeling of awe at the sight of the numerous schools, sometimes as far apart from one another as the poles, meeting together on the common platform of spiritual fellowship and catholic understanding, each blazing out its own trail, yet strangely united by a common call. They all seemed to be one with Sri Ramakrishna, that great prophet of heart-warming tolerance, who said:

> As various are the outlooks, so various are the roads:
> Cleave to your own heart's Lord but leave the others to their Gods.
> Have faith that you'll arrive, my friend, by following your own way:
> But never shout: "Who follows another's gone, alas, astray!"

One must, however, admit that although, among the Hindus, this great spiritual dictum has been undersigned by the different apostles of varying faiths, their followers

have not always succeeded in living up to the ideal of respect for all those schools of thought which have flourished under flags other than their own. For these partisans have, as often as not, been found wanting when weighed, thus blurring the clear air of charity and good-will by petty gusts of mutual recriminations. But then, as history shows, little-minded disciples have only too often dwarfed their large-hearted masters by their own narrow interpretations of what they preached, this being the genesis of sectarianism the world over. I well remember an incisive comment of the great sage, Sri Ramana Maharishi, who, when told that the disciples of a neighbouring sage could not appreciate him, smiled and said: "The truly great can appreciate one another because that is their *swadharma*.[3] Their disciples decry Gurus other than their own because that is *theirs*. So, how can you blame those whose *swadharma* goads them to muddle everything and to imagine an incompatibility which does not exist?"

Sri Ramakrishna often used to raise a laugh at the expense of these wrangling sectarians. "The war between Shiva and Rama may terminate, but their followers will go on everlastingly making faces at one another—the monsters (*bhutapreta*) on the one hand and the monkeys (*bānaras*) on the other."

Yes: the great catholic sages and saints of India, even when they have founded distinct schools of thought and Yoga, have never sponsored intolerance or the aggressive proselytising spirit in religion. They did, indeed, believe in cleaving to one's own *swadharma,* but they never deemed this loyalty incompatible with respect to a similar loyalty of others to their own. So, even when they differed, they agreed to disagree, nor did they hesitate to pay homage to those with whom they did not see eye to eye on many a count. They discussed, indeed, with avidity, argued with

[3]Vide GLOSSARY.

warmth, even challenged the soundness of one another's reasonings, but seldom did it occur to a particular sage to ridicule or castigate those whose outlook or gospel did not tally with his own. In fact the saints and sages of all denominations gathered at the Kumbha Mela not to fight one another, but to gain a deeper insight into spiritual truths by comparing notes. In the Upanishads we find refreshing examples of this tolerance and humility. The sages approached each other eagerly, and in a large spirit of enquiry, wanting thus to win to a deeper understanding of occult and spiritual truths. At times, when two sages had met and failed to find the solution to a particular problem, they made a pilgrimage together to the retreat of a third and there they resumed their discussions. A great sage whom we met at the Kumbha Mela, and of whom I have written in another chapter, told us that he had come there from the far North to meet other Illuminates. And so did many another. In fact, the sadhus forgather at Prayag mainly to profit by their contact with other sadhus and only secondarily to take a hand in helping those pilgrims who are ripe for the message of Light. For, obviously, only those seekers who approach these Illuminates in the right spirit, that is to say, in true humility and reverence, can really be helped. Meanwhile, there were visitors aplenty who had made the journey out of a superficial curiosity, and these not only failed to profit by their pains, but went back more puzzled than ever. Some even went to the length of having cheap flings at what they imagined they had found, saying:

"But look at this fantastic crowd! Look at the number of sects with their different badges, insignias and what not! And oh, what a babel of voices—of so many authorities claiming God as their monopoly! Look at the processions of gulled men and women genuflecting to them! There, look at those sheepish pilgrims who flock to these mighty apostles and go on for hours and hours listening agape to

their endless discourses! They come to be enlightened but go back seeing even less than they did before. Could it be otherwise when what they hear from one prophet is scotched by the very next? You go to the Vedantist seer and he will tell you solemnly that the One-without-a-second is the unique dependable Reality. Next you go to the Vaishnava saint who will tell you, in a voice choked with tears, that the Divine manifests Himself through Krishna and His devotees. You go to the Shankarite and he will tell you categorically that only the Self can be the object of your quest. So also the Tantrik will tell you that, first and last, one must take refuge in a Guru. The Shaiva will say: bathe in the Ganges never doubting her powers and you will be absolved from your sins. The Avadhuta will tell you ironically that no Mother-Ganga cult will avail and that only hard austerities can purge you from evil. The Shakta will tell you that by simply repeating the Name of Mother Kali will you be taken straight into Her bosom. The stern Buddhist will warn you against the phantom of Grace, adding that nothing but your own inflexible determination will lead you to the peaceful lap of *Nirvan.* One prophet will aver that the man who walks with his woman, his *shakti,* will be the quickest to arrive. Another will admonish: beware of women—the Lord comes only to the solitary who fares alone to the Alone. And then, O heavens! How each will quote scripture to make his point! The one with the lachrymose expression will advocate the worship of saints quoting the *Bhagavat* in his support (1.13.9):

> The saints who hold Him in their souls are missioned
> To sanctify all with His magic Grace.

The other with the grim beard will ban the world, flaunting

Viveka-chudamani,

Shabdajālam mahāranyam chittabhramana-kāranam,

which warns you menacingly:

The world's a labyrinth dark with din and pain
Where roams the distraught mind for ever in vain.

But then you go to the corpulent priest with the shaven head and he will tell you, quoting *Panchadashi:*

Athātra vishayānando Brahmānandāmsha-rupabhāk,

which assures you sweetly:

Our worldly joys derive from Him and do afford
A fraction of the bliss of living in the Lord."

And so our critics will go on, quoting the scriptures in order to put the sadhus in the wrong.

To those who have not trodden the path of spirituality, such virulent flings may, indeed, seem called for since the arguments, so far as they go, sound plausible enough. But to an authentic spiritual aspirant who has had some first-hand experience of the mystic path and dived deeper for a clue to the seeming contradictions, the plausibility of the indicter's arguments will make little impression. For he will not only see that every doctrine or admonition must be judged in the context in which it has been given, but that it did express a truth which, however partial and incomplete in itself, was a part of the total symphony, a bead in the whole garland of wisdom. He will see that an injunction which was beneficial in one century might well become the reverse in a later one and, what is more, that the sages prescribed variously for various seekers because they came with various aspirations, receptivities, *samskaras,* needs and outlooks on life and Yoga. Thus, for instance, they did not ask the householder to give up all he had, trusting to the Divine Grace to maintain him, any more than they asked the aspirant who burned to stake everything for the Divine to cling to the world even when he was disgusted by the endless playing for safety of the worldly-wise. Also,

by means of the penetrating power of the Light which they had evoked after a long and arduous struggle with the human ego, they had achieved a deep insight into human psychology and so were able to give only such advice to an aspirant as would prove really helpful to him. This advice was not the same for all because all could not arrive in the same way. A youthful cenobite with an unimpaired body was counselled to practise *āsana* and *prāṇāyāma* because he would be able to bear the reactions brought on by such strenuous exercises; a middle-aged head of a family was referred to simple meditation because he would not be able to profit by a more austere technique; an old man was told to take to the still simpler process of just repeating a Name. What the limited modern mind, with its insistence on reason regulating all our movements fails so often to grasp is that the spiritual evolution, as against that which is merely moral or ethical, seldom follows a straight line of ascent. Furthermore, the path of the spirit *is* a path of such strange happenings that it may necessitate new orientations at every step. More explicitly, what helps an aspirant at one stage of his evolution may hinder him at a later stage; and conversely, what hindered him at the bottom of the ascent may well help him when he has risen a few steps. More succinctly still, a simple remedy can hardly serve when the malady is complicated. There are, indeed, certain conditions which must be fulfilled universally—humility, truthfulness, sincerity, faith, purity, charity, constant vigilance and aspiration. But, for the rest, every seeker must find out for himself the path that is congenial to his temperament and this path is *not* the same for all as it generally is in the moral and worldly life. Not that the spiritual aspirant can do away with morality at one bound: for a long time he, too, has to follow the moral laws. But a time must and does come for him when the Light he seeks takes him in hand, after which he is guided by other and higher laws. Then, as his horizon grows more and more extended, the vista of life changes before him. No one

who has not made the ascent of the Spirit can even imagine how this vista changes as one mounts higher and with it one's needs and longings, promptings and reactions. The authentic sadhus were no fools: they knew, to their cost, what monkey-tricks the human ego could and did play if one was not vigilant. But they knew also how the Light gave the power to circumvent the truant ego, as well as how this power grew more and more effective in dealing with the clinging darkness which hampered every step of the forward movement. And then, as he plodded on towards the heights, the babel of voices became less and less confusing and he saw more and more clearly how the dissonances were to be resolved into that progressive harmony which accrues from a wider vision of life and of man's place in the universe. In this way he won to that deeper clairvoyance and clairaudience which enabled him to repudiate false beckonings and wrong suggestions in favour of the beacon of the Star above, and the call of the Flute in the heart.

The sages of India experimented along various paths and so gained direct experience of how they varied for different pilgrims even when they journeyed on to the same Goal. The modern mind, knowing only of one thoroughfare—that of morality piloted by reason and common-sense (if that)—finds all other paths curious if not quixotic. He does not stop to think how hasty he is in judging things of which he has had no first-hand experience. So, not having a clue to the total harmony of which they are necessary components, he holds up to ridicule the seeming contradictions in the sayings of the sadhus. There are, for instance, so many different states of the soul's poise which seem to him queer if not absurd: the wise man behaving like a child (*bālavat*); like one who has lost all initiative (*jarhavat*); like a mad man (*unmādavat*); like a man who has conquered all repulsion even for things from which the very nerves shrink (*pishāchavat*).

The Rational Man decides imperially that all this must be wrong since his Chief Minister, Reason, cannot account for such behaviour. But in all such cases a sadhu who, after long labour, has attained to a stable spiritual poise, is misjudged simply because the ignorant judge has had no experience of the absolute bliss and self-containment which comes to one who has attained to any of these states of consciousness. When utterly surrendered to the Lord, the wise man may become as simple as a child and be utterly secure and trustful because he *lives* all the time in the Presence of the One who is running the universe and whom he knows to be his constant Ward and Nurse. He grows inaccessible to fear or pain because he has found the Father and Mother and Friend in One who is the Healer of all ailments. We met some sadhus in the Kumbha Mela who lived in this child-consciousness. One of them was a man named Ram Puri whose eyes radiated both joy and spontaneous interest in everything. It is an enviable condition which is reached by those whose *swadharma* it is to live in a state of perfect simplicity and to be interested in everything but attached to nothing. Another sadhu of this type was Gopal Baba, the singer, who, while on his way to the Ganga, only sang Krishna's name and was as utterly oblivious to the world as though living only to sing of Him and to Him, nor cared whether the crowd talked or listened, bowed or, deriding, passed him by. Sri Ramakrishna used to say that the World-Mother had chosen to "keep" him in such a state all the time. Then there is a sadhu who, in outward seeming, behaves like a madman because he feels utterly free to comport himself as he will, bothering not at all about public opinion, consistency or appearances. He is "kept" in such a state by the Lord to reveal to those who have the deeper eye the bliss to be attained by a mode of living that is not amenable to reason's "sensible" dictates. Sri Ramakrishna, at a certain stage of his *sadhana* passed through such a phase: he went about like a man who is lost to all sense of shame and hailed even the cat as the

Mother Divine who, looking at him through its eyes, overwhelmed him with the ecstasy of that marvellous discovery. Then there is the state when the final realisation of the Lord as the sole reality permeating the universe delivers the aspirant from all sense of responsibility or initiative. He is content just to *be*—that is, to live in unison with the static aspect of the Brahman, a silent spectator steeped in bliss, because he sees the Immutable ensconced in himself and all else, trance-still in the heart of the whirl. The great Yogi Trailanga Swami lived in such a state, sometimes sitting like a mass of petrified beatitude, sometimes floating for hours in silent rapture on the Ganga. Then there is the state of consciousness—*sarvatra samadarshanah*—in which one perceives the One even in filth and so is as happy in a flower-garden as on a dung-heap.[4] To the modern mind this state is perhaps the most incomprehensible and unacceptable. But the Indian mystic recoils from nothing. The most intrepid of knowledge-seekers, he must verify for himself whether it is possible to be a master of the most instinctive nervous reactions to which man has been a slave from the dawn of time. He sees that it will not do merely to claim that: "All is the All-in-all—*sarvam khalwidam Brahman.*" He is not a coward, but an explorer of every possible avenue. If all is the Brahman he must verify the fact and see for himself whether one can really rejoice in dirt since dirt, too, *is* part of the All-in-all. And he will go straight to the assault and capture the prize: he realises what he has heard, namely, that it is possible, nay feasible, to see no difference between sandal-wood and carrion. In the *Bhagawat* there is the great example of King Rishava—claimed as an Incarnation of Vishnu—who not only ruled over a kingdom but wallowed happily in mire in which he felt His all-redeeming caress. This state we may not even wish to attain—(nor are we asked to do so, for no one is

[4]Cf. We feel what earthly sense has never felt,
We love what common hearts repel and dread.
Savitri.. I. IV.....Sri Aurobindo.

called upon to accept that which is not enjoined on him by his *swadharma*)—we may even feel repelled by the bare idea of it. But the man who has conquered this nervous repulsion and so lives in a bliss which enables him to contact the Beautiful even at the antipodes of Beauty, will merely laugh at the repulsion of those who, themselves in bondage, contemn one who is emancipated from the last shackles of the senses. For, even from the rationalist's point of view, such a state as King Rishava achieved must be adjudged enviable, since it led to an unqualified bliss born of the direct contact with the Divine in what, on the surface, seems irreconcilable with our conception of the Divine. King Rishava's state was not a myth: there have been many great sadhus in India, known as the *Aghorapanthis,* who have reached that identical consciousness. Here is an authentic report: Sri Ramkrishna said that he had once seen a man gleaning crumbs of food from a dustbin, but that his clairvoyant eye detected in him a God-realised soul of the highest attainment where the others saw but a wretched beggar. A little later, he adds, the man entered the temple of Kali and recited a hymn to her whereupon the whole temple rocked and the Mother smiled! "And when he had finished singing," he continued, "he came out in a rapt state seemingly unconscious of those who had gathered, overawed. But I followed him till we came to the dirty pond in our compound. I folded my hands reverently and asked him to tell me something about the findings of a man who has attained knowledge. He smiled and pointed at the dirty water of the pond and said: 'When you see no difference between this water and that of your holy Ganga *then* you may conclude that you have attained Knowledge.' With this he walked serenely off without once looking back."

I wonder, however, whether even a reverent tribute of this kind can ever carry conviction to those who are finally persuaded that every happening must be, first and last, sifted and judged, from the standpoint of reason, and that

all such phenomena of consciousness must win the seal of the mind before they can be passed as valid. In other words, that which makes no sense to the mind of reason must be dubbed senseless or "funny". Unfortunately for the Mind, however, the Soul refuses to have its findings dismissed as "funny" and, sometimes, may even win against all the sensible promptings of the worldly-wise. It is easy for the Mind to laugh at the Soul as at one who has gone mad, but it is easier still for the Soul to smile at it all as at a baby's babblings. What I mean by this may perhaps be better explained by what I am about to relate.

Years ago I heard from the late Rai Bahadur Sri Bhupal Chandra Bose a moving story about a friend of his who had become God-mad. Sri Bose was a friend of my father's who used to speak of him as one of the most humble and upright of men. As, in addition, he was Sri Aurobindo's father-in-law, we all used to love to hear from his lips how people had regarded the great Yogi at the time of his marriage with his daughter. The old man felt diffident when asked such questions, for he had a rare regard for truth and always hesitated to describe the personality of his great son-in-law lest his personal tributes prove inadequate. One day we were talking about the reaction of the ordinary man to his absent-mindedness. Sri Bose smiled and said: "When a man is seized by God you can hardly expect him to conform to the conventional codes of impeccable conduct laid down by society. In fact, when the descent of God's light is too sudden one may well behave for a time like a madman. This happened to a dear friend of mine, so I know. It is really incredible, but it happened all the same and before my own eyes. It took place years ago, but it remains as fresh in my memory as though it were a drama I have just witnessed. It was a drama, I tell you, that moved me to my uttermost depths". And here is the story he gave us while his eyes glistened.

"His name was Asutosh Bannerji", he said, "I came to know him rather well as he visited me almost daily to chat of this and that. I was then a Deputy Collector of Shillong and had been assigned a nice bungalow. Asu was my next-door neighbour, a householder and a Government servant, like myself. He was liked and respected by all because he was an unpretentious, humble and good man who was noted, besides, for his honesty, truthfulness and purity of character. He was a worshipper of Mother Durga and used often to relate to me how she had showered her Grace on him, undeserving though he was.

"One day, in the middle of the night, the thatched hut of a neighbouring peasant caught fire. Asu, hearing an outcry, rushed to help and started throwing buckets of water in the direction of the fire. Then, hoping to be more effective, he impulsively climbed to the top of a ladder which was resting against that part of the hut which was not yet burning. He had a bucket in his hand and we, from the ground, were keeping him well-supplied with water. But, as ill luck would have it, the wind suddenly leapt up. He was caught in its ring. We stood aghast, helpless, for we could hardly see him enveloped by the smoke and the dancing tongues of flame. He felt suffocated and, seeing no means of escape, uttered a prayer to his beloved Mother Durga. He was saved as though by a miracle. We took him to the hospital where he told me all.

"'I thought, Bhupal, that it was the end,' he said, 'for the fire was all around me and there was no means of escape. So I resigned myself to the Mother's will and prayed to her just when I glimpsed her indescribably beautiful face luminous with love. "Have no fear my dear child," she said tenderly, "for I am here." I remembered no more. When I regained consciousness I found myself here, in the hospital, burnt all over but still in the land of the living, as you can see. It is all the great Mother's

Grace! Who but Herself could have saved me when all seemed lost?' And so he went on, in an ecstasy of adoration.

"He was indeed, saved," Sri Bose went on, "but his face had been badly burnt and he was disfigured for ever. We all felt sorry for him on that account, but, strangely enough, he did not give it a thought. He would talk only of the Mother Durga who came to him nightly and of how unspeakably lovely and tender she was. 'And do you know, Bhupal', the simple-hearted man used to say, wide-eyed with wonder, 'she often presses me to wish: in fact, sometimes she insists on granting me a boon—any I'd choose to ask! But what need has he of a boon who has received *Her* Grace?' And tears would course down his cheeks as he went on repeating to me his wonderful Mother's loving talks with him.

"One evening, as he was recounting to me what had happened on the previous night, I had a brain-wave. For though I cannot claim that I understood it all, I used often to wonder if some divine prescription might not restore the skin of his face. So I said, at a venture: 'By the way, Asu, since the great Mother is so solicitous about you and insists on granting you a boon, why shouldn't you avail yourself of it and ask her to restore your face to what it was?' He was aghast. 'How *can* you suggest such a thing, Bhupal!' he said reproachfully. 'How can one, to whom the boon of nectar has been given, unasked, desire an earthly boon?' And so on. But I went on persisting day after day till, one evening, I had another brain-wave: I asked him to tell his Mother that his *friends* prayed for this boon. 'At least suggest it to her', I said. He went back, moodily.

"The next evening he said, with tears in his eyes, how the great Mother had laughed and said: 'But is that all? On the next full-moon day after your usual morning dip in the pool your face will be as it was.'

"But as he was not at all keen on it he forgot it straightaway and went on, as usual, talking in his simple ecstatic way about the Mother's great compassion. Thus it happened that I, too, forgot all about the full-moon day. So it was that one morning when he came to me after his usual morning dip, I was stupefied. 'Why, Asu', I exclaimed, 'your face—your face! It is just as it used to be before the accident!' He jumped to look at a mirror and then fell down prostrate on the floor, sobbing 'O Mother... Mother ... Mother ...' And I saw from my wall-calendar that it *was* full moon!

"Since that day", Sri Bose continued, "the man changed out of all recognition: He lost his sense of responsibility, gave up going to office and shut himself up in a room. I went to see him but he refused to answer. A few days later I received a letter in which he only intimated to me that the Mother had called him and so he was going. What happened to him after that nobody knows: he could not be traced. And people only said, pityingly, that the poor man had 'gone off the handle'. But I know where he is—deep in some forest, with some disciples. And one day he will come back to inspire others."

I have related the story substantially as I heard it from Sri Bose's lips. There may be inaccuracies of detail because he told me this story more than fifteen years ago and as he is dead I cannot get it revised by him. But the miracle that happened to this simple devotee of the Mother and the Godmadness that overtook him as a result of his having contacted Divine Grace I cannot possibly have overdrawn. Besides, it so happens that I have had this story accidentally corroborated from another source. I was reading a Bengali monthly when I came upon an article in which the writer claimed that miracles could happen still if the devotee was ripe enough to be able to profit by them. As an illustration of his thesis he gave a full account of the incidents I have

related and wound up with a letter Sri Asutosh Bannerji had written to somebody on the eve of his disappearance.

But although I believed Sri Bose's evidence because he was reputed for his honesty and truthfulness (and he had similarly believed his friend's account of the Divine Mother) most rationalist sceptics will, I know, dismiss the story out of hand and, in particular, Sri Bose's testimony as to the miraculous healing of a burnt and disfigured face. But the cap is for the one it fits and a believer does not write for any save those who are evolved enough to be humble and receptive enough to be able to profit by the message of mystic wisdom. So, to resume.

As I have already said, one could meet sadhus of every category at the Kumbha Mela. I should have liked to pay my respects to some of those who could be called 'God-mad', but where a hundred thousand sadhus had congregated it was not always possible to pick out those whom one would wish to meet. In the meantime we encountered any number of the other types. There were the *Urdhwavahus,* for instance, whose bodies are emaciated by fastings and austerities; who let one arm grow limp through long disuse, or who stand meditating for hours in the ice-cold Ganga with their eyes rivetted on the sun in the practice of what is called *trataka-sadhana.* Then there were the *Nagas,* who live stark naked all the year round; the *Parivrajakas,* who go about the livelong day tinkling bells; the *Maunis,* who have lived for years under a vow of complete silence; the *Shirshasanis,* who stand for twenty-four hours out of the twenty-four and who sleep with their heads resting on a vertical pole attached to an oblong plank, or who meditate for hours while standing on their heads; the *Avadhutas,* who follow no formal discipline: the *Mandaleshwaras,* who, as the heads of various Ashramas (or *Akharas,* as they are popularly called), that is to say, Monasteries which are run by means of donations, often invite large groups of sadhus to their sumptuous banquets; and, finally, the half-baked

sadhus, who spend most of their time in discoursing grandiloquently on the scriptures and in expounding everything that can be expounded—the scholastics, Pundits and so on. Naturally, there were many among the sadhus who had not arrived; others who had progressed a little and then rested on their laurels, fed and supported by a band of disciples and admirers; others again who had come masquerading as sadhus in order to make a little money with the minimum of effort, and a great number who were not sadhus at all but who had taken to sadhuism as a career, because there are many who can be gulled. But it is hardly necessary to state that the importance of the Kumbha Mela lies in its power to attract the greatest sadhus, some of whom go nowhere else. The lesser fry and the mountebanks exist everywhere and one must not judge a race except by its best types. One may add here also that although the feats of mortification of the flesh which are practised by some of the sadhus need not be regarded as manifestations of true spirituality—since one can surely go far without mortifying the poor body and making a virtue of preferring the tortuous way to the simple—a Hindu must follow his *swadharma* of tolerance and not castigate it all too hastily. It must always be borne in mind that many of the greatest figures among the mystics have found such austerities helpful. And that even when we cannot understand certain practices which cause pain to the flesh, we must judge even these with tolerance, if only because we may gain in humility and the power to understand what Wordsworth called "unknown modes of being". At all events, one can hardly be too sure of being sure, for that is a state which, as often as not, stems from ignorance and poverty of imagination. For when all is said, anybody who has a tongue in his head can wag it, but few indeed are those seeing ones who can suspend their judgment till they know what it is they are contemning. We might, at least, before passing swift judgments on the sadhus who undergo these deep austerities, pause and ask ourselves whether some of them may

not be as superior to us in intelligence as they are in courage and why they have chosen the thorny path in preference to those strewn with roses. It is easy enough to brand austerities as mental aberrations, but if the tree is to be judged finally by its fruit, how can we be so sure that they are aberrations, when we find, as we often do, that through those same hard disciplines many a sadhu has acquired a mastery over his desires, dominated his inertia and, above all, attained to a poise of radiant tranquillity? Even if we deny him a wisdom greater than our own (such as it is) can we, in honesty, begrudge him the credit of a courage and will-power which is beyond most of us—not to mention the testimony of the unquestionable light that is on his face? And, after all, what is wisdom? Do we call a man truly wise who, having attained success, continues to pursue ephemeral pleasures with a zeal worthy of a better cause? Or shall we call him wise who is a voluptuary, given over to the revels of the senses? Or do we call a man wise who is over-greedy and short-tempered, who is avid of power or popularity, who is so infected with an overweening self-esteem that he cannot help flaunting it even when he knows that such conduct only lowers him in the estimation of others? An agreeable social life which has been built on a successful career may, indeed, commend itself to most of us, but does the eye of wisdom in us confidently pronounce such a life as the highest possibility to be realised? Nevertheless, we have so far given our adhesion to this very life of little satisfactions and fleeting pleasures—alternating with boredom on the one hand and positive pain on the other—because it is the only mode of living we know, whereas the life consecrated to a mystic seeking is one of which we have only heard or read. There are, however, times when it calls to us, times when we feel utterly without peace, or weighed down with a sense of having reached a dead end. But even then we can hardly see ourselves choosing a life which looks so grim, forbidding and insecure. Not that there is not plenty of evidence

to show that the life of the true mystic is anything but joyless or unstable. On the contrary, there is a solid mass of testimony bequeathed by the great mystics which is enough to convince any fair-minded appraiser that, compared with their vivid experience of abiding bliss and of the sense of the Divine Presence, our little transient joys that we cling to so vividly are as pale as lamplight beside the midday sun. But we dare not emulate them because, in the last analysis, we cannot bring ourselves to break the bonds of attachment and habit. In rare moments of insight we do, indeed, see the illusion of it all, but as we feel ashamed to admit as much, we repudiate the glimpse itself as untrustworthy. Instead, we start rationalising our inability to break out of our little living into something laudable and obligatory, thus making a virtue of necessity.

But even this is not the whole story. There are wheels within wheels and we are held up by various other forces which, being occult and more complicated, are the more difficult to label and explain. There are, for instance, the coaxings of our lower nature; there is the entrenched back-pull of the inertia inherited by the animal part of our composition; there are the strong cowardly voices which, masquerading as wise friends, warn us darkly against playing for high stakes; there are the shadowy fears of the unknown, which the bargainer in each of us equates too often with the abysmal; there are the mists and clouds of muddled thinking, the storm of opposition of those around us and so forth. All these play their part in holding us to our chains, prevailing on us to cherish our prisons till we succeed, alas, in stifling the still small voice within us with specious arguments, so that even when we feel strangely moved by those liberated ones who remind us of the heritage we have forfeited, we hesitate to take the plunge, and, in order to preserve our self-respect, label the bugle-call irrational. Thereafter any reason which comes handy, buttresses our self-complacence, when, rationally and

superiorly, we start inveighing against mystics as escapists who, unwilling to shoulder the heavy burden of life's duties, have chosen the easier life of no responsibilities. This being the picture of the rationalising psychology, is it any wonder that it should lead us astray by making us misconceive the message they could give us? Unwilling to accept, we start by holding them suspect and end by dubbing them "parasites" who live only for themselves and come to deal with us worldings, if at all, only when we go to them for advice or they come to us for alms!

But how does the rationalist critic know that evolved mystics feel any the less warmly towards their fellow beings? The fact is that he does *not* know, but as, deep within himself, he comes to resent their spiritual seniority, he makes out as damning a case against them as he can. One is reminded of the prosecuting counsel who is there not so much to find out the truth about the crime as to get a conviction somehow—anyhow. So the mystics are denounced as being insensitive to human suffering, dwelling in a world of their own and failing to live cheek by jowl with worldings. Unfortunately for him, however, there is a large body of evidence to the contrary for we do know quite a few things about the authentic sadhus: first, that they have given many a ruined man hope in utter despair; secondly, that they have healed the afflicted of many an incurable disease; thirdly, that they have often enough given those who know no peace effective advice as to how to deal with the world by attaining comparative mastery over those passions which entail misery—advice that have told because of the spiritual authority of the advisers. I, personally, know of cases where a drunkard, after having failed utterly to wean himself from alcohol, won, by means of a Yogi's blessing, the strength to give up drinking altogether. I have known sadhus who have helped the deeply bereaved by showing them the way to peace and spiritual regeneration; life-long invalids by fortifying them with inner strength;

the profligate by awakening his dormant will-power to be rid of his sex-obsession. I have seen miserly men behave generously, weaklings resolutely and egotists unselfishly, because of the silent influence of a saint or guru, and last, though not least, I have seen them rescue the utterly derelict by the mere touch of a saving Grace which worked through the inspiration of their holiness—truly a miracle touch, which can give the bankrupt a faith to live for, the restless a taste of peace that can heal unbearable pain; the nervous an assurance of security and the unhappy the experience of that redeeming rapture which draws the soul to the higher life.

It goes without saying that such transformations can only be compassed by the saint who is genuine. But, curiously enough, when modern man passes his sweeping judgments on sadhus as a whole, he argues from the untenable premise that it is only the false prophet with all his sins of omission and commission who stalks the land, while the authentic shining lights are as good as non-existent. This is curious, to say the least, because in other walks of life he goes by an altogether different criterion, that is to say, he accepts the message of poetry from the best poets, of science from the best scientists, of politics from the best statesmen, of medicine from the best doctors. But when he comes to such a congregation of holy men as came this year to attend the Kumbha Mela he does not feel it to be the least necessary to take pains to seek out the genuine sadhus: he surveys them all in a lump—in a pontifical bird's eye-view—and dismisses them summarily as anachronisms in "this our age of science and enlightenment"—picking out the most mediocre and exhibiting them as typical. He does not stop to reflect that if such a generalisation were valid from such premises, how badly the other professions would fare. For the sadhu, too, emulating the rationalist, might retaliate by just picking out many a careerist and tuft-hunter among the scientists, poets, politicians and industrialists and dam-

ning science, poetry, politics and industrialism as unqualifiedly and intrinsically evil.

I have laboured this point at the risk of sounding something of a platitudinarian because the ultra-moderns among our self-complacent intelligentsia seem not only to be growing ever more blind to the spiritual values but to be taking a positive pride in their progressive myopea. I will venture to give an instance to make my meaning clear.

A few years ago, I was asked by a friend of mine, a prominent advocate of the Calcutta Bar, to dine with him. I had just emerged from my eight years' seclusion in the Yoga-ashram of my Guru, Sri Aurobindo, and was singing away everywhere devotional songs in Bengali, Hindi and Sanskrit. At my friend's request I had already sung one evening at his house. He had been warmly appreciative of what little I had to give, but we had had no kind of intimate talk on that occasion. I, therefore, looked forward to the dinner engagement because I had been given to understand that he wished, no less than myself, that we should come into closer contact with one another. I had little anticipated, alas, what was in store for me! But I must not go ahead of my story.

When I arrived, I found him surrounded by a bevy of admirers who had also been invited, ostensibly to meet me. The banquet was a sumptuous one, but as in those days I was a vegetarian, I had to decline most of the dishes.

"What?" he said, darting at me a glance of pity. "You, too, Brutus? Why this fad about grass-eating? What has made you give up fish and meat—since when?"

More surprised than nettled, I answered:

"Didn't you know that we were all vegetarians in Sri Aurobindo's Yogashram?"

He appraised me for a while.

"But you never used to believe in the herd-instinct—for surely you don't mean to tell me that you *prefer* to be a vegetarian?"

"Prefer—no. But I am persuaded that vegetarian food, though less palatable, is more conducive—"

"Conducive?" he interjected. "Fiddlesticks! Look at the sadhus who infest the land, eating grass! Vegetarianism suits those who want to vegetate. But surely *you* don't want to do that, do you?" His admirers smiled, dutifully.

With a mighty effort I reined myself in and went on eating in silence.

He gave a guffaw and said to a boy who was serving: "*Maunam sammati-lakshanam*[5]—say the scriptures." Then with another laugh: "Dilip is nothing if not open to conviction. Give him that chicken cutlet—he will wolf it now that he has seen light—at long last." This time his admirers laughed, applauding.

I felt mortified but still put a curb on my tongue. But when the serving-boy pressed me to take a cutlet at his master's bidding, I declined again—with some vigour.

My host considered me now with an amused expression.

"What?" he said, "I say, Dilip, why all this unnecessary fuss? Vegetarian food for humanity? Or do you, like the sadhus, believe in emulating our mother, the cow?"

As was to be expected, there was another chorus of appreciative titter. I felt like leaving the table, but refrained, unwilling to make a scene. Chafing, I went on playing at eating.

But worse was to come. He suddenly addressed a guest who was seated next to him, evidently sure of his moral support:

"Do you know, I have really come of late to wonder whether I am really as wise as I think. For look at the

[5]A Sanskrit proverb which means: silence is a sign of consent.

sadhus who put on *gerua*.[6] How simple! You just pose as a holy man in a holy robe and you *click* instantly—all is solved and you no longer have to earn your bread in the sweat of your brow. And if on top of that you can gull a few into becoming your *chelas*[7] then you just walk on air. All you have to do now is to grow a beard and cherish matted hair and sit speechless and solemn under a tree and the overawed rabble will just squirm at your feet. They will offer you the choicest food and deem themselves blessed if you will but gorge it all straightaway. Yes, I tell you my friend, the sadhus can teach us a thing or two."

He chuckled, enjoying his own brilliant wit, while his admirers simply rollicked in their mirth. Then he started on another tack.

"Do you know", he said. "I once went to the Kumbha Mela. It was indeed a sight! A vast army of vegetating vegetarians in *gerua,* mumbling magic incantations and blessing devotees who fell at their feet in the hope of instant salvation! And the Messiahs have nothing else to do but to accept the homage of those they gull! But when there are so many fools abroad, who but a fool will refuse to be wise? Yes, Dilip, to batten on human folly—that is the essence of wisdom. Ergo, you are right in hailing these parasites as the wisest of the wise. It is *I* who, the fool of fools, have chosen to earn my living by working day and night to keep the wolf from the door. How I wish I had known better!"

I decided that enough was enough and made up my mind to play up for a change.

"You never showed up your wisdom better than you have tonight, my courteous host", I said. "My only regret is that you should have paid the sadhus a tribute in your native humility, to which *you* have the sole copyright, since

[6]Ochre-coloured robe, insignia of Indian sadhus, generally.

[7]Disciples and hangers-on.

it is not they but you and your kind who can teach us a thing or two. For while they can at best look holy without being saints, you can get away with behaving like a boor without being a Philistine. I don't know, though, whether you would have cut a more brilliant figure as a mumbling magician than you have as an artful advocate: but I do know this, that you could have kept more fools agape with your oratorical antics than they can achieve with all their gleaming *geruas* and cheering *chelas.* For I am now fully persuaded that in one of your previous births you must have been one of those demagogues in Greece who gulled the mob—a feat at which our poor sadhus must turn green with envy, since they can only gull country innocents. But there is one thing I should like to suggest, if I may: namely, it is never too late to mend. With your Ciceronian eloquence and Voltarian virulence what can you *not* do? Why waste your rare talents pleading for a handful of clients and criminals? Just go round the countryside 'debunking' the holy and we, the gulled, will disclaim the sadhus and acclaim *you* as the modern Messiah. And you will be acting in character, too, for the iconoclasts always break old idols to replace them by their own images. A time was, sir, when I used to wonder what would happen to India if our glorious sages were to be suddenly carried off. I cast about in vain for their next of kin who might succeed them and fill the vacuum. But you have opened my eyes tonight and I see light now—'at long last,' as you so aptly put it. Who cares if the ancient eagles die out, when the modern crows have come to stay? Hark: there they are cawing, in the Conference of Croakers, that the eagles knew nothing of soaring! And we, bamboozled orphans, will have to hail you and your kind as the new prophets, sir, because, having lost faith in soaring, what resort have we but to believe in croaking?"

I confess that I have deliberately put it all rather dramatically and for a reason which is too obvious to need stressing,

as also that I did not say all this in one stinging outburst. The unfortunate altercation lasted a full quarter of an hour and I have only recorded the substance of my retaliation. I have no intention of claiming that he listened spellbound to my tirade while I harangued him in this way. And in fairness to my friend I must add that he apologised to me in the end—although it was, I think, more because he had come to realise that it was bad form to affront an inoffensive guest than because he had come to see, after having done battle with me, that all his flings had in the end been little better than "splendidly null"—to use the language of the poet of faith.

I would not have gone to such lengths to describe so personal an episode had not these gibes at our holy men become almost a fashion in the drawing-room discussions of our enlightened Intelligentsia in modern India. I had felt rejuvenated at the Kumbha Mela because there I had come upon a marvellous consistory of saints beside whose undimmed light the stormings of the modern rationalists seemed so utterly puerile. The light of serenity on their faces—or, to be more precise, on those of the best of them—reminded me of a quatrain of Tagore:

Black clouds mocked at the starry train
And roared: "We've won the fight!"
But anon they fled—when shone again
The inviolate stars of light!

Doubtless the whole question must, in the last analysis, be clinched by direct experience—*aparoksha anubhuti*—and no other. If there is an "inviolate" Truth, a Superconscious Being of Light and Love who overbroods this our world of pain and shadows, and if He is not a mere moody magician playing a pointless play in a purposeless universe, then, for all His superb sublimity, He can be of little use to us unless we realise Him as superb—here and now. To put it more trenchantly, a nondescript something which presides in an inaccessible somewhere can have no

real significance for humanity if He is utterly beyond the ambit of human experience. But fortunately for the soul, though He is not amenable to the thinking mind, He *is* amenable to the yearning heart. From the great sages (of the Kumbha Mela and elsewhere) men have heard this guaranteed in unequivocal terms since the first dawn of the Soul's Awakening in this dark world, though only a small minority have been able to profit by their mystic message. For, in order to profit by such a pledge, one must first accept it in the real sense of the term. This is not easy, because real acceptance involves responsibility: that is to say, he who truly accepts that the Godlover's *is* the highest Light is expected to go all out to realise it. So most people prefer to rest content with a mere verbal admission of the possible existence of such a Being. Such a concession, however, though it may help as a starting-point, is no fillip to the soul-urge of one who really wants to arrive. But then none can arrive who has not a burning aspiration, and a burning aspiration can only accrue after a *sadhana* of long and dauntless persistence. It is here that the sadhus who have realised God fortify our aspiration. But to be able to avail oneself of their help, one must accept their testimony to start with—which means that one must eschew all doubts about the possibility of God-realisation. Only, alas, that eternal heckler, the God-deriding rationalist, has been a cherished guest with us too long to be easily ejected. So he outstays his welcome and keeps butting in with his plausible arguments against faith and fervour. At the Kumbha Mela when I was in the presence of the great Yogi, Sri Jai Krishna, I used often to amuse myself by conjuring up a debate: I used to imagine him confronted by a modern rationalist of Europe. And this is the duologue I heard rehearsed on my mind's stage—with two parts of my own personality pitted against each other: the one sympathising with the Western way of assaying Truth—with the Mind, the other with the Indian way of realising Truth—with the Soul. For the sake of dramatic picturesqueness I will call

the scientific-materialist seeker WEST (to represent the self-confident modern mind as it stands today) and the God-realised mystic EAST (to represent the Seer-soul emancipated from the bondage of the ego). But as I have partly identified the latter with the radiant Sri Jai Krishna Giri, I will introduce him in the following chapter, so that the reader may be the better able to appreciate the personality of the Indian mystic whom the Western inquirer sometimes deigns to accost in order to be "informed".

This picture has been drawn by three of us: Indira recorded the talk the great Yogi gave us: I supplied a few remarks she had missed and Sri Budhubhushan Mullick stepped in, later, to fill in a few gaps we had left.

Lastly I may add that the report of our conversations with Sri Jai Krishna has been read by him and endorsed. After reading our joint report he wrote from his mountain-retreat in Bharmour, in a letter dated May 28, 1954:

Dilip Kumar Roy,
Jai Narayan!

I have read the report you sent me and have appreciated it deeply. May the Self be united with the Supreme whether it fares on the road of Knowledge or Love or Works: that Union is the final end of life. As for the Lord's Grace it is always there. Om Hari!

I trust both you and your daughter-disciple Indiraji are well. Jai!

Sri Jai Krishna Giri.

CHAPTER IX

LIGHTHOUSES OF KUMBHA

January 20, 1954.

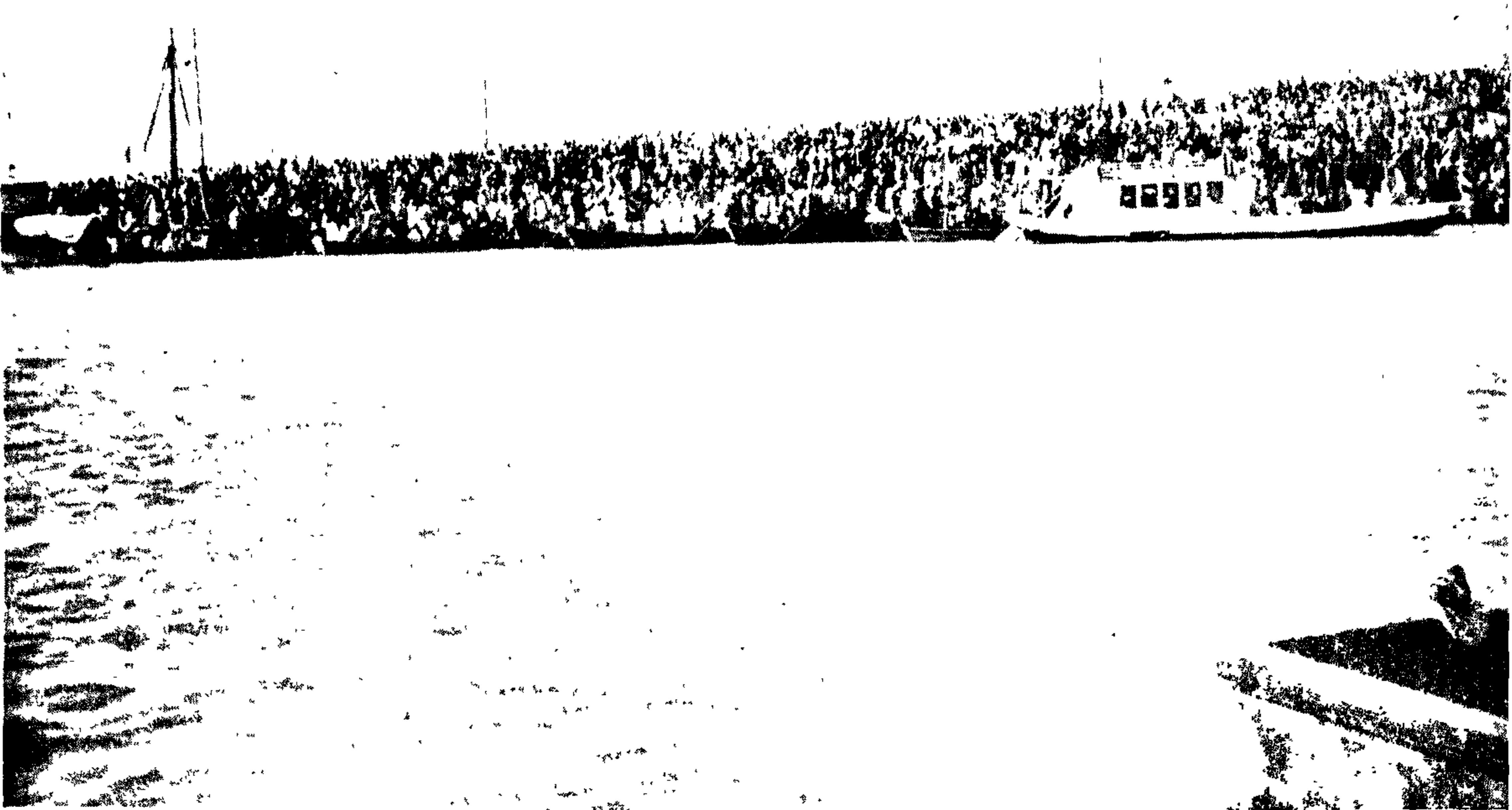
Dear Sir Chunilal Mehta,

I HAVE heard from you such a lot about the sadhus you have met that I may as well return the compliment by telling you about a few *we* have had the good fortune to contact here—at the Kumbha Mela.

What we have seen at this great congregation of sadhus and pilgrims has moved us to our depths. We were given, as it were, a glimpse into the heart of Reality, the Great Reality that *is* India—where dreams come true and the dynasty of the holy still abides! We may well be proud. But to begin.

Our friend and host, Sri Bidhubhushan Mullick, being the Chief Justice here, we have been able to spend hours and hours in his tents which he got erected for us near the huts of the sadhus. We go there almost daily to breathe in the holy atmosphere, sanctified by the heart-beats of countless saints and seers, big and small, and millions of devotees and aspirants who flock there to bathe at the confluence. Now listen.

Yesterday afternoon we went from our tent to the Juna Akhara where, in a humble hut, my eyes were caught by those of a bearded sadhu. He was looking intently at me. I felt drawn by the serenity of his face—the face of a child who had attained Peace. I felt drawn and entered his hut and made him my obeisance. Indira too was deeply impressed by the light on his face. He greeted us almost affectionately though in complete silence. As I folded my



A view of the Triveni Sangam during Kumbha



Sri Gopal Baba, Sri Rama Snehi and party

hands he gave me such a lovely smile! I felt a deep peace but there was no call to speak. His name is Ram Puri.

Then we walked on, flanked by sadhus gazing at us on either side, huddled in groups. We saw some women sadhus, too, but these never even looked at us. A sadhu had taken us in tow and took us straight to another tent where we were again kindly greeted by an old Yogi who gave us some sweets.

We were asked next to pause in front of one of the neatest tents I have seen here. We were told that a very great sadhu lived there. We had to wait a few minutes as we were informed that he did not see everybody. I gave my name to one of his disciples and, after a minute or two, we were ushered in. Indira, Sri Mullick and I went in and were instantly bewitched by his face. His name is Jai Krishna Giri. He hails from the Chamba State in the Punjab. His face is not only beautiful but radiant. And what eyes—what chiselled features! He gave me a glance and smiled, but after that hardly looked at us again—just remained sitting there silent, with down-cast eyes. We were all deeply impressed by the spiritual beauty of his face. He is certainly not an ordinary Yogi: he would stand out in a crowd—a King among men! Indira made the same remark later. We were all in ecstasies over him, contemplating him in hushed wonderment. But he spoke not a word!

After a few minutes I ventured to speak.

"How could one attain *bhakti* (devotion)?" I asked, in simple Hindi.

He kept silent for a little, then spoke slowly and softly—in chaste Hindi. I could not catch every word, so as soon as we returned home I asked Indira to put on paper all that she remembered, which was practically everything! Only she transcribed it all in English while Sri Jai Krishna

addressed us every time in Hindi. I wonder if he knows English at all. However let me tell you what he said—from Indira's report.

"If you can love the Lord, then alone may you have *bhakti,* but then you have to learn to love Him as your very own. If you do any work it can be done best, as you know, if you look upon the work as your own. In the same way, if you follow the path of *bhakti* then you must aspire to love Him as your very own—which is true *bhakti.* Only bear in mind that you must learn to love Him not in the way that pleases *you* but in the way that pleases *Him.*"

I asked after a brief pause: "What about the blessings of the saints and sadhus and *mahatmas?* Do they not help?"

He nodded. "Yes, they can give some support—only you mustn't forget that the *sadhana* can and has to be done by yourself: they can't do it for you. You see, it is like this: the elders wish their children well and can and do give them some helpful guidance now and then. But none can evolve to his full stature unless he learns to strive and to grow, relying upon his own effort. The same thing about spiritual *sadhana:* it can only be done by oneself and never by proxy."

"But you will give me your *ashirvad* (blessings)—won't you—that I may have true *bhakti* for the Lord?"

He smiled and his face lit up.

"The Lord's *ashirvad* is always there for anyone who truly aspires and that alone is *atal* (unshakable) for with Him there can be no *khushamad* (sycophancy) or *gulami* (obsequious hanging on) since the moment you turn to Him and Him alone all that becomes superfluous. He paused, met my eyes and added: "I can only tell you what I have known. But everybody's path is different and I do not know much."

We were too moved for words. It is not that he had said anything new, but rather the way he said it—with a spontaneous simplicity and humility—that went straight to our hearts. We will go again to contact his holy and magnetic personality—we felt in him something so lovely and radiant and mellow. I hardly know how to assess him. But this I do know, that he will remain with me an unforgettable experience.

January 21, 1954.

In continuation of my last night's letter.

Yesterday afternoon we drove again to the Jhusi side in order to pay another visit to the saint. His face has been haunting us ever since our first accidental meeting with him. For us the Kumbha Mela has taken on a new significance because we feel we have run to earth a real lighthouse whose light has changed the landscape. We yearned to drink in his sweet voice and simple exposition of the spiritual lore. How different a speech sounds when the speaker talks from personal experience! Besides, I had another object in visiting him again last evening: I hoped that we might, with luck, have a little more intimate and a trifle less impersonal contact with Him. As you know, I have always loved to establish a personal bond with saints wherever that were possible. For I have always felt that spiritual truths and experiences acquire a new potency when communicated through a direct personal interest and give and take.

We were amply rewarded. The day before yesterday we had conversed with him in a small room. Last evening we were shown into a bigger one which was flawlessly neat and clean and at the same time made cosy and warm by the simple but thick *daris* (carpets) on which we sat. Indira, Sri Bidhubhushan Mullick and his beautiful daughter-in-law, Pratima, sat on his right. In order to be able to hear him better I sat close to him on his left.

His greeting this time was at once more cordial and personal: he kept looking at us again and again while lavishing on us unstintingly his heart-warming smile. I have seldom seen such a lovely smile. It transformed him in a moment from a seer of grave exterior into a simple child, trustful and self-unconscious. We were immediately put at our ease by his deeper welcome and easy friendliness. He called out to one of his disciples to get us some tea.

I asked him whether repeating the Name helped *bhakti* to evolve. He evidently thought that I had wanted to know whether one Name was better than another.

"He is at once One and Many," he said. "The Names are only formulated by His devotees. In all ages, whenever a devotee has called to Him in love, He has responded and appeared before him in the cherished Form and in the preferred Name. It is thus that the unique *Om* has flowered out into the many. This was granted by him in order to protect His devotees and to ward off the hostility of the God-rebellious (*dushta*)".

I was reminded of Lord Krishna's pledge in the Gita:

Paritrānāya sādhunām vināshāya cha dushkritām
Dharma-samsthāpanarthāya sambhavāmi yuge yuge.

I am born from age to age to quell the rebels,
Protect the holy and establish dharma.

I did not deem it necessary to explain the point of my question and asked another:

"Does not one profit much by contact with the sadhus?"

He nodded. "Yes. For such contacts do give one a deeper confidence in spiritual wisdom and an increased assurance of the Reality. And in the present age, especially, the Lord promotes the confidence—or rather, makes Himself more easily available—mainly in two ways: through the images and through the sadhus."

At this point Sri Mullick gave him some account of myself and added that I would deem it a great favour if Swamiji would consent to hear a *bhajan* (devotional song) or two.

He smiled and folded his hands in gracious acquiescence whereupon I asked him whether he would like me to sing of Krishna or Shiva or Kali.

He looked me straight in the face and smiled again.

"Does it matter—when all is He?"

"But—I mean—if you follow a particular path—"

He laughed. "I am a pilgrim of every path. So go on: sing what you like."

"You know the Sanskrit hymn of Shankaracharya of course: *Chidānanda-rupah Shivoham Shivoham?*"

He nodded and I sang the hymn or rather five verses out of the eight. I give below my translation:

The ego, intellect or what they call
Mind and the senses—none of these am I:
I am not the eyes nor nose nor tongue nor ears,
The earth nor winds nor fire nor even the sky:

I am, in essence, the Shiva who only is,
Pervading all as Consciousness and Bliss.

Hate and attachment, greed and fond illusion,
Envy and pride's vainglory I disclaim:
I bow to no moral codes or legislation,
To wealth nor idol nor even salvation's name:

I am, in essence, the Shiva who only is,
Pervading all as Consciousness and Bliss.

Virtue nor sin, sorrow nor happiness,
The sacred *mantras* nor the holiest shrine:
The Vedas nor to rituals I belong,
No eater am I—no pabulum is mine:

I am, in essence, the Shiva who only is,
Pervading all as Consciousness and Bliss.

I know no fear—even of doom or death,
Father nor mother nor barriers of caste:
I am uncreate—have neither friend nor foe,
Guru and disciple I have overpassed.

I am, in essence, the Shiva who only is,
Pervading all as Consciousness and Bliss.

Beyond all Name and Form and Time I stay
As the Vast Formless overarching Space:
Untrammelled by Life—behold: I overspread
All all that is—alone and fathomless!

* * * *

When the song came to an end I found him sitting still with eyes closed. He had never before looked so beautiful—a statuesque figure almost as though carved out of stone—in his rapt attitude of *dhyana*—or was it *samadhi?* How could an outsider tell?

After a few minutes he heaved a deep sigh and opened his eyes. He gave me a glance and folded his hands once again as he greeted me with one of his sweetest smiles. I bowed down to the ground.

After a brief pause I said: "May I sing a Hindi *bhajan?*"

He nodded readily and folded his hands again. I sang the famous song *Chakar rakhoji* of Mirabai. Here is my translation:

Oh, make me serve, Lord, thee
In deep humility.

I would fain stay thy slave and pray:
may I thy garland weave!
Then in my gloom thy beauty's bloom
will set my soul a-heave.

Thine eye's one spark shall quell my dark-
    rid slumber's undelight
And my breath repeat thy Name flower-sweet
    when thou thy troth wilt plight.

Everlastingly I will chase thee,
    a shadow loyal and true
And will receive whatever thou give—
    thee, thee alone to woo.

I will O Friend, on thee depend,
    my heart laid at thy feet
And sing and sing of thy Grace, King,
    through every lane and street.

Some, in despair, to thee would fare
    to win swift boons from thee,
Some long to know, some ache to glow
    in flame-austerity:

Mira, thy slave, chants: "Nought can save
    but thine unflawed compassion."
She only cries to thy sunrise
    in love's song-adoration.

In ecstasy, I dream of thee,
    vestured in gleaming gold
And crowned with plumes of peacock and blooms,
    O Flutist aureoled!

If thou indwell my heart, why still
    must yearn my eyes for ever?
In my chaos of pain—Oh, come to reign
    on the bank of Love's blue river!

Later Indira and Sri Mullick told me that tears had coursed down Swamiji's cheeks while I was singing, in Hindi:

Palakonse mai dungi buhāri pathape hridaya bichhāun (I will cleanse the streets with my eyelashes and spread my heart there so that the Lord may walk thereon.)

* * * *

I broke the silence again.

"Does not devotional singing promote *bhakti?*" I asked.

"Assuredly," he answered. "Anything that prompts one to turn towards Him is a help and one who can sing devotional songs may well consider himself blessed. Only one must sing in an attitude of offering. For in *sadhana* the importance of the right attitude in everything can hardly be overstressed."

"If one does *nishkama karma* (disinterested works) in the world, can it truly be a part of one's *sadhana?*"

He nodded again.

"Anything that is done for the Lord in an attitude of offering is acceptable to Him. In the *Gita* the Lord says that He cherishes even a leaf or flower if it is offered to him by one out of pure love. It is not *what* you offer but *how* you offer that matters to Him. Similarly, in Karma Yoga what matters is not what you do, but the spirit in which you do it. After all, the Yogis who practise *prānāyāma* and *āsanas* offer it all to Him even as those who pray offer Him their prayers at all hours. And when so offered, He accepts what you do even when it is incorrect—as, for instance, in the case of Valmiki, who, as you must be knowing, repeated ma-ra, ma-ra, instead of Ra-ma, Ra-ma. Only one thing: there must be no personal desire in anything you do—no motive prompted by self."

I said: "Those who follow the *jnāna-mārga* (the path of Knowledge) claim that *jnāna* (Knowledge) is superior to *bhakti*."

Swamiji gave a smile of irony.

"That is what *men* say. But it all derives from a *bhrama* (error and illusion). The paths seem to differ only so long as the difference exists between us and Him. But when the Union is once achieved one sees all in Him and Him in all. And then one cannot fail to realise that *bhakti* and *jnāna* are but two facets of the same Realisation. The claims about their incompatibility are only made by the self-assertive, for the silent communion between the devotee and the Divine is beyond those who have not achieved Silence."

After a pause I asked again: "What is your view of Guruvada? Some say that the Guru is indispensable. Others that he is redundant."

"Well," he answered, "one who is walking on an unknown path towards a distant Goal does derive some real help from those who have already traversed it. So the true Guru can help, surely—because by following Him you may gain greater confidence. But ultimately the Lord is the one Guide, the Guru of gurus."

At this point one of his disciples brought us some sweets (*halooa*) on different platters.

I smiled and remarked: "It is said that we, visitors, should feed the sadhus and not the other way about."

He smiled back and made a graceful deprecatory gesture: "But why should it be so? In the end it is a question of satisfaction (*prasannatā*), isn't it? For in the last analysis, nothing is really mine or yours, but must belong to Him and so to all. So each of us can, surely, claim an equal share in everything."

I asked Sri Mullick to invite him to our house, but Sri Giri declined.

"I do not go anywhere," he said. "I hail from a far-off place. In the winter the snow there lies three feet deep before my cottage. It is so pure and silent and peaceful up there! Still, I have come here to meet some great saints

—for who knows in and through what form the Lord (*Nārāyana*) may choose to reveal Himself!"

"But we may come here again?"

"Surely," he smiled.

We made our obeisance. The whole of last night his serene and lovely face recurred to me again and again. We all felt blessed by having had his *darshan.*

January 23, 1954.

As I wanted Sri Jai Krishna Giri's blessings on my birthday, we again drove to his tent last evening. When we arrived Swamiji was talking with some visitors, so we waited outside his tent. One of his disciples, in an ochre-coloured robe, asked us to be seated, but we preferred to converse with him standing. I asked him where it was exactly that Swamiji lived and what precise *sadhana* he had followed in his life. His disciple talked volubly and with warmth about his Guru's greatness and gave us a good many facts concerning his life.

"He practised yoga for many years with the blessings of his Guru Maharaj, Sri Ram Giri, who is lying here ill in the Juna Akhara," he said. "My Guru lived in a village called Bharmor which is stationed at an altitude of 10,000 feet in the Chamba State. He had been living there naked in the cold for twenty-one years till his Guru, Sri Ram Giri, told him, three years ago, that he could put on a loin-cloth. But", he added confidentially, "he still takes his daily bath in the freezing cold water up there even in the depths of winter, when all around him lies the pall of snow which does not thaw for months. Princes and Princesses come to our humble hut to pay him homage, but he remains utterly unaffected and often does not see them at all." He stressed this with some pride.

We gathered also that though he had been asked by his Guru to become the head of his order, he had declined the

honour because he wished to concentrate only on the Divine. The disciple was still talking in this strain when the visitors came out of the tent and we were asked inside.

We sat as before on the carpet. Our friend Ranjit Singh had come with his wife from Lucknow for my birthday. So they, too, were of the party.

I had thought of a question which I asked straightaway.

"The day before yesterday," I began, "you said that one need not leave the world and one's home in order to attain the Divine. But why then do spiritual men flee the world when they want Him?"

"Because they cannot help it", he answered. "You see, one does not leave the world for intellectual reasons but because one is seized by a sort of God-madness and so cannot resist the call to renunciation. In such a state what happens is that one looks this way and that but can find no peace or rest anywhere. So one rejects everything, saying it's not this, nor that that one wants till, ultimately, one leaves everything to win what one thirsts for but fails to find in the world. And one runs on madly till the Lord Himself appears before one and says: 'That will do'. Thereafter one may come back to the world with the Divine sanction to take others by the hand—or at least those who can profit by his guidance.

"But this does not mean", he added, "that the Lord is not in the world also. The *Gita* tells us: He is.

Sarvendriyagunābhāsam sarvendriyavivarjitam,

which means that He manifests in all the senses even when He transcends them. But as such a conception is difficult to grasp in the present age and life is becoming more and more complicated, He has made things a little easier for us by prescribing the *nam-kirtan* (singing of His name) to those who cannot follow a more arduous self-discipline."

"What about *prānāyāma* (breath-control), meditation etc., which so many follow?"

"Why, they are commendable, assuredly", he answered. "For these render the body stronger, which is all to the good. But in the last analysis, it must remain a personal question. After all, the more you discipline yourself, the sooner you win the desired result. It all depends on how much you want to strive and are willing to bear and stake."

"One would like to bear everything for the Divine," I commented. "The only trouble is that the path of austerities seems rather too difficult to tread."

"Everything is difficult to start with," he answered. "It does in fact, often enough, taste like poison itself in the beginning. But in this context there can be no loss of effort:

Nehābhikramanashosti pratyavāyo ne vidyate,

as the *Gita* puts it. For with time and practice things do become progressively easier; then the soul begins to find itself and in this deepening discovery *rasa* (delectation and joy of interest) accrues increasingly to the aspirant till there is complete bliss."

Sri Mullick asked: "You say that every act can be offered to the Lord. Is there then no distinction between good acts and bad? And then how is one to know what is good and what is bad, since there seems to be no absolute criterion?"

"We must judge things according to the prevailing spiritual criteria. In the present state of the world, history can only teach us its lessons when we can profit by them. As for what is good and what is bad, the Lord has kept nothing hidden from us. It is only we, human beings, who conceal things from one another. All the descriptions of hell, for instance, are intended to open our eyes to what is

right and what is wrong. All is created by Him: the good and bad, the *devas* (gods) and the *asuras* (demons). Once Parvati asked Shiva, why He had created such a thing as poison. To that Shiva answered that He had not only given poison, but the knowledge as well of what happens if it is taken, so that if a man takes poison and dies, he has only himself to thank for it."

He paused and went on to add: "Men are duped by their illusions and ignorance somewhat like the moth which only sees the light of the flame and dives into it without suspecting that the function of the flame is not only to shed light but to burn as well. The Lord knows this and so does not expect too much from men who, like the proverbial moth, think and act in ignorance. He says in effect: 'All that I want is *your* happiness and so I want you to learn that right actions conduce to happiness'. The elders do not wish that their children should give up all play and movement and keep sitting near them all the time. All that they wish is that they should not hurt themselves. They only say: 'Remember that we, the elders, know a little more than you do'. The Lord, similarly, says to us: 'Keep playing, only remember that I am there to fall back on and that I want nothing but *your* happiness.' So the thing is to recognise the Lord as the Lord and Father and ourselves as His children." He smiled and added: "But I lay no claim to originality—none at all. All this has been said down the ages by those who have known Him and His ways. I am only lisping out their findings once again—that is all".

At this point Sri Mullick said with a smile: "The ladies are complaining that we men are putting all the questions and that they have not even had a sporting chance."

He smiled and answered: "Those who are *chatur* (shrewd) know how to profit by all that passes round them imbibing what they need and rejecting the rest."

As we rose to take our leave I asked him if I could come once more and sing to him.

He folded his hands and gave me one of his rarest smiles of acquiescence.

"Certainly".

"When? In the morning?"

He pondered for a little.

"You can come in the morning after ten", he said. "I rise at four every morning and after my dip in the Ganges meditate till ten."

"And in the evening?"

"This time is quite suitable".

"Is it not rather late at six? Somebody told me you start meditating then."

"Well", he smiled, "I have to stretch a point in that matter now and then, for people do come. So you too can come at six if you like".

26—1—1954.

Yesterday morning we had a beautiful experience. I call it an "experience", as a lesser word will not do. It happened like this:

As we were walking in the Mela towards the Ganges (where I bathe daily) we saw a small procession of men, women and sadhus, singing and dancing. The chief singer, a man in loin-cloth and shaven head, was accompanied by a number of sadhus as well as some women who were dancing very simple steps, completely oblivious of the audience around them. Although his song was a simple *nam-kirtan* there was something in the man's face which attracted us magnetically. He was merely singing "Radhe Govinda, Radhe Govinda" over and over again to the same tune. Indira, deeply moved, made her way into the ring and watched, with tears in her eyes. I was no less moved, but managed somehow to hold back my tears.

As, however, we stepped inside the magic circle—if I may so put it—a feeling of awed reverence seemed to surge up in us with a rush. Next I found myself contrasting his singing with music proper sung properly, which, as often as not, is as soulless as it is impeccable. I learnt that this poor devotee of Krishna had come from a far-off place just to bathe daily in the Ganga. Every morning, after his dip in the river, he goes back to his lodging, singing the Name of the Lord. Nobody gives him money, nor does he expect any alms, for, although he looks like a beggar, he is not one. He is a sadhu, interested in nothing but singing the Name to a simple tune. Every morning he starts off alone and a few men and women, who are evidently drawn by his ecstatic dance-song, wait for him and join him. It is thus that a chorus-party is collected—a party of just a few poor men and women and sadhus—till a veritable procession is formed which follows a given route and the members of which take not the slightest notice of the spell-bound audience that flanks it on either side.

This was indeed a new experience and one which sent a thrill through us. It was with difficulty that I restrained my tears, but I could not keep myself from bending down to take the dust of the mystic minstrel's feet. He gave me a beautiful smile, but did not speak—he could not, in fact, as he had to continue singing. Suddenly Indira drew my attention to a Yogi in a deer-skin who had a remarkable face, austere but serene, with a beatific smile hovering round his lips. He too had been singing as one of the party but not dancing. Indira and I took the dust of his feet also and he smiled as he blessed us. We felt a deep joy. Indira, with tears in her eyes asked me: "May I join the dance?"

I did not know what to reply, and at that moment, fortunately or unfortunately for us, the singing came to an end. I then asked some of the people the name of the serene Yogi in the deer-skin. I was told that it was Ramasnehi and that he was the singer's Guru. An unusual

name, but how significant, for it means one who cherishes Rama, the Lord, with a tender affection! I then asked the name of the singer in the loin-cloth. He overheard me.

"My name is Gopal Baba, my son!" he cried with a radiant smile.

We resumed our walk to the Ganges in which I took my dip in a state of indescribable joy and peace. Indira could not speak.

"India is India!" I said to her.

"I felt blessed to-day," she answered, "that I could take the dust of two such mendicants in His name, who can thus go on singing in the street in such world-oblivious ecstasy, concentrating on nothing but the Lord for their audience!"

I learnt subsequently that once when Gopal Baba had been travelling in a train without a ticket and was thrown out by the ticket-collector because he could not pay for the journey, he went on singing ecstatically the Lord's Name. People gathered around him on the platform and, then and there, subscribed to provide him with a ticket to his destination. The Lord's ways are inscrutable! How he protects His devotees after getting them stranded, as though to redeem His promise in the Gita:

"Ananyaschintayanto mām ye janāh paryupāsate

Teshām nityābhiyuktānām yogakshemam vahāmyaham."

Those who will worship me and me alone

I guard like a sentinel in woe and weal.

Yes, indeed, we did feel blessed and proud, too, that we were able to call holy India our spiritual Mother. And she is still living in the Lord and His devotees: the saints!

January 28, 1954.

Sri Jai Krishna gave us each a smile of welcome.

Dr. Rauf, India's Ambassador to Japan, who had accompanied us this time, was introduced to him by Sri Mullick. He folded his hands and bowed.

I framed my question in my broken Hindi with some difficulty, but Sri Mullick helped me with his excellent Hindi, for which I was truly thankful.

"You told me the other day," I said, "that one must learn to love the Lord in the way that pleases *Him* and not in the way that pleases *us*. Now the question arises, how are we to know what *His* will is which we must do to please Him?"

As usual, he answered at once:

"He being *Sat-Purusha*—the Being of Truth—only Truth can please Him and not falsehood. So it follows that the more you unearth this Truth in yourself, the closer you come to Him and the closer you draw to Him the more you can perceive what His will is."

"Do we perceive His will in our hearts?" I asked. "Or does He reveal it directly to us?"

"He manifests Himself in both ways," he replied. "For one thing, you must remember that *Darshan* (Realisation) is not the end. But till one realises, it is essential to stay one-pointed in one's aspiration for Him, as did the famous Shabari, in the *Ramayana,* who had been told by some Sages that she must wait for one thing only: the coming of her Lord, Rama. She complied and waited only for Him, praying for nothing but His Advent till He came as had been predicted. But when He appeared before her and finally accepted her, He did not tell her that it was the journey's end for her. On the contrary, He explained to her in great detail the nine modes of *bhakti* (loving the Divine) and revealed to her all that she would have to achieve before she would be able to rest for ever in Him. It is the same with all of us: that is, each of us has to concentrate exclusively on attaining Him, remembering

meanwhile that His work can only begin after the Realisation, for it is then that will be revealed to the devotee what He wills and is pleased to accept."

"But can it be His will," I asked, "to urge His devotees to go to inaccessible places, say, the mountain tops or deep into the forests, where it cannot but be very hard to live? Why, for instance, did you have to go to a place 10,000 feet high, where it is so bitterly cold and where even the procuring of your daily food must have been far from easy?"

He gave me a smile of indulgence, but only for a moment.

"It is surely easier to do one-pointed *sadhana* away from the din and distraction of this world," he said. "And then to have to live in a place where conditions are difficult is a training for one's body and mind and a real initiation into a complete reliance on the Lord. It is also a quicker way of getting the senses under perfect control. In the last resort, it amounts to a kind of flinging of the gauntlet at Him; as though, standing face to face with one's Maker, one were to say: 'Here is this body and this soul: they belong to you. Now either give me my birth-right—the essence of Yourself—or take what is yours.' It amounts in fact to this that you force a decision on the Lord."

He gave us a radiant smile and continued: "But to take up such an attitude is not incumbent on one, nor need it last for ever. This attitude only helps so long as it is necessary for one's *sadhana*." He smiled again and went on: "For instance, it is no longer necessary now for me to stay up there in the snow. I remain there more from habit than from anything else." He lifted his eyes to mine and added: "Up there I have nothing except one *dhoti* (piece of cloth) and one tiger-skin. You see, up there one is alone with the Lord. He moulds one all the time into *His* likeness—detached from the world and independent—*mukta*—in the truest sense of the term. But when you come down from the heights to consort with the world, the

worldly-minded impose all sorts of things on you in the hope of making you like *themselves.*"

"Can nothing be done," put in Dr. Rauf, "by living the worldly life in the midst of the world?"

"Assuredly something can be done," he answered. "For He is not only *there* but *here* as well. Also you may be sure that He has not brought us into the world to make us unhappy. So long as you are pleased with life as it is and yourself as you are, you will be left by Him to yourself and your little pleasures. It is only when these pall and you want Him and the whole of Him that you have to give the whole of yourself." He broke off and added after a pause: "In the end, both types are necessary for His *lila:* the people who cherish this material world and life of little pleasures and the few who give up the world and everything they hold dear to find their souls—in other words, those who want to bring down the *Vaikuntha* (Heaven) into their lives by becoming first like miniatures of Him who runs both the worlds."

All this he said with such unassuming simplicity and without so much as a suspicion of over-assertiveness, yet with a calm certitude no storms could shake, that we were deeply impressed and moved. When read, his words are of course not likely to make a fraction of the impression they made on us who received them, distilled through his radiant personality. But even so, a fraction of the light of the spirit must count in a world where darkness reigns supreme. As the *Gita* puts it: "*Swalpāmapyasya dharmasya trāyate mahato bhayāt*"

Even a little of the spiritual light rescues
us from the grip of great fear.

Lastly, I sang a few hymns. In one, while I was singing of Krishna's Flute, a beatific smile overspread his lips as he listened, rapt, with closed eyes. Was he actually hearing the Flute? Who knows?

CHAPTER X

THE MESSAGE OF KUMBHA

PRAYAG, the holy town—Allahabad, India. In a small but charming hut on the bank of the immemorial Ganga, two men are discovered conversing on the Purna Kumbha day—February 3, 1954. The younger of the two, an Englishman and an Orientalist, is in his early thirties. Dressed in a blue lounge suit, he looks distinguished and virile if not aggressive. We will call him WEST. The other is a Yogi in his middle sixties—radiant, tranquil and extremely handsome. He is reputed to be a God-realised saint which is the reason, perhaps, why he looks at once humble and confident, keen-eyed and sympathetic. His eyes are the most remarkable part of him, penetrating and alert and yet radiating kindliness like twin stars. He often smiles though somewhat abstractedly. He is dressed in the traditional ochre-coloured robe—*gerua*—of the Indian mystic with a *tulsi* garland round his shining neck. We will call him EAST. "Oh, but he is a Vaishnava of the traditional type!"—say his detractors, the ultra-moderns. "But he can deliver the goods," counter his admirers, not to mention his disciples. Time—afternoon.

WEST: May I take the liberty, sir—

EAST: Please be seated. Can you sit on the floor or shall I get a chair for you?

WEST: Please don't trouble. I have been in India for five years now and have learned to sit cross-legged. (Sitting in the Indian way) I have a few questions to ask you, sir—that is, if you have time.

EAST (smiling): We live in eternity, my friend, haven't they told you?

WEST (smiling back, reassured): Thank you, sir, (clearing his throat) I would like to—er—make two things clear to you at the start: in the first place, I have come to you not to be lectured but to be informed. In the second, we westerners are—I warn you, sir—somewhat—er—critical though not irreverent, I hope. I say this because I notice that people here all fall prostrate at the feet of you holy men. I don't quite know if that mode of salutation is expected of me—

EAST (cutting in): Not at all, my friend. One follows a tradition. Bowing to the mystic is not yours. So just go ahead. Only first tell me: what made you come to me? Are you a reporter of a paper?

WEST (deprecating): No, not nearly as bad as that. I am, well, a—student of philosophy, but more an inquirer into something deeper than what is known as philosophy, if you know what I mean.

EAST: I do—indeed, and am glad, besides. For what is known as philosophy in your country is somewhat unknown to us. We, in ours, do not live and die for merely intellectual values. (Pause). So I gather—you want to be informed, though not lectured about what philosophy deals with but cannot tackle?

WEST (smiling): You have said it. So can I ask you a few questions which are rather—er—beyond philosophy? (Encouraged by his nod) Thank you, sir. (Pausing) I don't know where and how to begin. You see, I saw you, in the morning, bathing at the confluence with your eyes fixed on the sun. It impressed me, for you looked for a long time at the sun without blinking.

EAST (smiling ironically): So that is why you came to me?

WEST (hastily): No, sir, I didn't mean that. There was a light on your face which—er—shall we say, spoke to me. So I came to know or rather to inquire. But I must warn you again, sir, that we cannot venerate as easily as the people round you can. All the same I felt—er—strangely drawn to you. (Pause) I cannot accept hearsay either but—er—I assure you I—well, I am open to conviction.

EAST (with a faint smile): But on your own terms, is that it?

WEST (colouring): I don't get you, sir—

EAST: What I mean is: you came to me to be convinced, but only through mental reasonings. Am I not right? But in that case—I warn you, in my turn—you have come to the wrong shop. For the One who is beyond philosophy happens to be too strong and elusive to be grasped by so weak a net as can be woven by the mind with its arguments.

WEST: Alas, sir, but it's the only net we have!

EAST: What about the other—that of the *Atman?*

WEST (pulling a long face): You don't mean—the Soul?

EAST (smiling): *Atman,* with us, is a more comprehensive as well as a deeper term. But as we have to speak in English we are obliged to have your word Soul do duty in default of a better.

WEST (ill-at-ease): Well, sir... you put me in an awkward position. For this word has all but lost its edge—or shall I say—er—the glamour—plus the prestige it once enjoyed in medieval Europe, thanks to the authority our mystics wielded then. May I—er—be a little more explicit, as the question has something to do with what I came here for?

EAST (sympathetically): Go on.

WEST: Thank you, sir. You see, it is like this: since the advent of science many things have been debunked and your—or rather, our—Soul was one of them. Not that it has not a pleasant kind of ring still, but it has definitely lost its cadence. In other words, to exploit the visual imagery, it casts more shadows than light. We admit the Mind with its higher reaches of intuition, divination and what not—that is to say, all the elusive perceptions which the great artists invoke—inclusive—er—of the subconscious, the subliminal and I don't know what else. But what exactly *is* this Soul, we have been asking frantically: in other words, we have not been able to lay our finger on any distinctive attributes of the Soul apart from the Mind's, if you know what I mean—

EAST (smiling): I think I do—to my cost. For it is somewhat embarrassing for us, who have *known* it as something as distinct from Mind as Mind is from instinct, to be able to find no words that can explain our discovery—except of course to those who also want to know it in the *way* we have known—that is, by direct experience. But even with them we can hardly be of much help until they too can be prevailed upon to know it in the same manner.

WEST (dubious): Do you mean to say, sir, that it can be experienced as—er—something distinct from the Mind, or do you—want to tantalise us?

EAST (amused): It depends on what you call tantalising. Suppose you were reading out to a boy Keats'

Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard

Are sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipes, play on

etc. and tell him that it ought to touch a chord in his heart, do you tantalise the child?

WEST: But the adult—the man of science and reason, with his highly developed mind—isn't, surely, a child!

EAST: But—to the man of Yoga and God—who has realised the Soul as something far exceeding the most developed of minds—that is what he precisely *is*. (Smiling) But I know: a child resents nothing more than being called a child.

WEST (flushing): Pardon me, sir, but banter is not argument.

EAST (mollifyingly): But I was not bantering, my friend, I assure you. Only as you told me you have come to me for information, I have no choice but to give you what *we* know for a fact—(as *you* know the delight of poetry for a fact—of experience)—that the Soul is something which no mind, however developed, can possibly conceive. To the child the phrase "unheard melodies" makes no sense though it does to the lover of poetry. But how explain this to the child?

WEST: Pardon me sir, but this, boiled down, is of the essence of dogmatism. The child when it grows feels something definite in poetry—I mean if it grows to have a taste for poetry. But the mental man does not similarly grow to have any perception of the Soul. So there is no evidence in support of your statement that the Soul can be known as an entity distinct from and superior to the Mind.

EAST (smiling): In other words, you demand proofs in support of the statement you question, don't you? Not that I do not understand your difficulty, my friend. I do, I assure you—the more vividly as I myself once lived in the same mental consciousness as you do now—when I used to wonder, like you, what on earth was meant by the word, Soul! But I understood when I grew up spiritually—following my Guru's directions. Then I came to realise it as an emancipated consciousness of bliss and beauty which my mind had been unable even to conceive, from its own plane. I needed then no other proof of the Soul's superi-

ority to Mind than that of direct experience—*aparoksha anubhuti.* What is more, when I had this experience, the scales seemed to fall from my eyes and I saw a Light which I could never have imagined even in my wildest imaginings. And then I was thrilled to find an exact description of my discovery in the testimony of the ancients, the seers of the Upanishad and the *Bhagvat.*

WEST (frowning slightly): Discovery of the ancients? Could you possibly give me an idea of what it means?

EAST (ruefully): Nay, my friend, no more than you could give the child an idea of what Keats meant when he spoke of "unheard melodies". All I could do would be to give you a transcription of the rapture they experienced on discovering the Soul's utter reality, a rapture that overtook me, also, when I found Him, the One, the Infinite Lover, at one with the Soul—inside this puny, trammelled, unimpressive *me.* For then I experienced an ecstasy which I equated with that of my great predecessors who were able to record it with a vividness utterly beyond me. However, as you insist on an idea I will give you just one sample: this is what my Soul attested (His eyes glistened as he recited, in a moved voice):

I have known Him, my Krishna,
Who throbs with my heart-throbs:
I have known Him, my Krishna,
Who beholds with my eyes:
I have known Him, my Krishna,
Who breathes with my breathing:
Profounder than oceans
And vaster than skies.

(Dropping his voice) I have transcribed my own experience as best I could in English. But the ancients expressed themselves in Sanskrit which could convey more because of its richer vocabulary and depth of vibrancy not to mention the opulent symbols they could draw upon. But the

experience was essentially the same. I will not quote what they wrote because you may demur that it is rather high-faluting, even pretentious, as it had sounded to my ears in my novitiate days. But when, subsequently, I saw what they had seen, I rued my ignorant judgments and I realised why they had admonished us again and again whenever a spiritual aspirant felt tempted to appraise with the Mind That which was beyond its comprehension.

WEST (nettled): But then why did they endeavour to express what they saw—since they did express 'That' in language, didn't they?

EAST: It is a good question, but can be answered. They tried to express because, in the first place they felt a joy in transcribing what they had seen; in the second, because it blazed a lasting trail which helped others who aspired to follow in their footsteps and last, though not least, they felt that even when they failed to describe the beauty and the glory of what they had visioned, they could, with their inspired utterances, bequeath something of their ravishment, the wonderment of the miracle come true. That is to say, they found that although they could never do more than hint at the nature of the Realisation, they could describe, to some extent, what happens to one who has realised Him in his soul. To give a typical example: there is a famous couplet in the *Taittiriya Upanishad* where the Sage describes thus what accrues to one who contacts the Ineffable:

Yato vācho nivartante aprāpya manasā saha
Ānando Brahmano vidwān ṇa bibheti kadāchana.

Which means:

Baffled, the words and mind return from Him
Failing to appraise. But still who even once
Savours His rapture is delivered from fear.

Or, to give one more instance, take the great revealing couplet in the Ishopanishad:

Yastu sarvāni bhutāni ātmanyevānupashyati
Sarvabhūteshu chātmānam tato na vijugupsate

Which holds:

Who sees all sentient creatures in his soul
And his own soul as one with all on earth,
Can feel repulsion for none evermore.

(Smiling) But perhaps you would feel rattled again if I were to add that such a consummation which, you must agree, is devoutly to be wished, can only be attained by one who acts from his soul-vision and not from mental theorisings.

WEST: You do us—I mean the adherents of the Mind—a grave injustice, sir. For if we follow our mental convictions it is not because we do not see the limitations of the Mind, but because—I don't know how to put it ... but may I say, we follow the Mind's guidance because we can espy nothing better on the horizon. But you will pardon me if I still contend that it sounds somewhat unconvincing. And the reason probably is that today we can find no Sage in the West who has *had* such a soul-vision as you are pleased to put it. Your ancients may mean something to you—for they may, for aught we know, be bred in your bones—but to us, Westerners, they are at best just doctrinaire whose doctrines have failed to change our daily lives which are dominated by fears and repulsions and what not. For you see sir, we—in the West—insist on seeing before believing and we see *no* saints in the West, I repeat, who have transcended the Mind's limitations. In fact, that is why I came to your country of time-old spiritual traditions. But so far I have seen none even here who has carried conviction. When I saw the light on your face I was strangely moved, so I came to ask you about your personal experience of what you call the "truths of the Soul". But

though what you have quoted from your scriptures does impress me, I must confess that for all its sonority it somehow fails to *click*. If there *is* such a breath-taking realisation, why do I find it so difficult to believe it? Why can't I see what *you* have seen?

EAST: I can answer that. Have you seen guinea-pigs when they are just born?

WEST (taken aback): Guinea-pigs?

EAST (nodding): Yes. I used to love them when I was a boy. But I used to find it curious that for some days after their birth they could not see anything—because their eyes stayed shut. Gradually these would open and then, little by little, they would see. When my own soul's eyes opened, years later, I saw, similarly, what I had never been able to see before. But I did not realise till then that my soul had been born, like the guinea-pig, with its eyes shut. My mental eyes, which had opened sooner, kept me beguiled till, to my discomfiture, I made the discovery that the Mind, though it could see clearly enough as far as it went, did not go far enough. It was *then* that, urged by a dim intuition that it was possible to see more than I did, I started looking about me. This happens when the Soul's eyes are just beginning to become unglued. Of course they perceive very little at the start—just incipient intuitions—but even that much suffices to act as a goad. This urged me to go ahead of my mind even though it cried halt, resentfully enough, because its self-respect was hurt. But that could not be helped as—to quote your own proverb—you can't make an omelette without breaking eggs, any more than you can open to the Soul without first breaking out of your mental shell. And this could happen to everyone, were it not for the fact that though we all have the power, if we will, to burrow through the chrysalis of the Mind, few of us care to make the effort of willing to break out into the larger freedom—the greater seeing. (Smiling) Didn't your poet say that man seldom takes kindly to "unknown modes

of being?" But whether he likes it or not, in the end every one of us will have to break out of this mental shell and get to know those greater modes of being which are unknown to the Mind, because to live is to evolve and to evolve is to outgrow one's limitations. Inevitably, this takes time. So you, too, have to wait till the hour strikes for you to reject your little living and fulfil the conditions without which you can never enter the larger life of the Spirit.

WEST (who was getting restive): With all my regard for you, sir, I must say that your analogy of the guinea-pig is in—er—somewhat indifferent taste. You simply shouldn't have compared the shining mental man to the puny guinea-pig! This immense and marvellous civilisation of ours has lifted Man from cannibalism to internationalism, from trudging on foot to flying in airships, from hovels to sky-scrapers—not to mention the far more stupendous vistas that are going to open out before us—for you can hardly set a limit now to the miracles that science is going to work in the near future. As Wells so rightly said, science is only in its infancy now—so what the adult science is going to attain, no one can foretell.

EAST: Just one moment. What is your personal reaction to the atom bomb of which you made no mention? Are you really as proud and happy about that as you are about the other achievements of your Idol, Science?

WEST (taken unawares): What? Atom—well—er—(colouring) I mean—no, not quite happy. (Desperately) Yes, I suppose I have to admit that it did make me feel a bit funny last year when I was in Russia. War was in the air and almost every night I had nightmares of thundering explosions. But (defiantly) one mustn't be swayed by mere personal reactions. Science has taught us to be dispassionate. Look at the far-reaching changes it has already brought about. In no more than a couple of

centuries and although, I repeat, it is still in its teens, it has begun to dominate matter, life and the world's goings-on; it has ruled out epidemics, famines, tamed Nature, given Man a new dignity by teaching him to think freely, built empires, opened out new avenues to enjoyment. And all this has been achieved by the Mind of Man, sir, and not by your high-priest, the Soul, which can at best enable a handful to live in the cloistered bliss of *Nirvan* without humanity at large being one whit the wiser. (Censoriously) It is this Colossus which you have compared to a—er—guinea-pig!—Oh, I say—

EAST (soothingly): You have misunderstood my point, my friend. I am sorry to have trodden on your corn. For, believe me, it was not my intention to dispute the patent fact that your Mind *is*, today, the ruler of the world or rather the bulk of humanity. And it has stayed to rule—though it came to serve—because Man chose to evolve thus, through mental lights; and the Lord, having given him free will, felt somehow like waiting till Man had found out the limitations of his idol. Not that science was doing anything wrong, mind you, in wanting to explore and experimenting with such empires as it could build. Its attempts to know and to build thus were sanctioned by Him who had fathered the scientific spirit in Man's researching Mind. He even sanctioned its getting top-heavy and domineering because He knew its limits and what would happen if and when it overstepped the mark. The ancients never took exception to Mind so long as it knew its place. Also they pointed out what it was and how it could serve best by helping in its own domain and not by presuming to govern where its function was to obey. They showed in their effulgent lives what a deep fulfilment stems from such obedience—by which I mean the Mind obeying the Soul. They foreshadowed also what would happen if the Mind, intoxicated by its success, clamoured to dictate where it could only profit by obeying. In other words, they enjoined that the higher

values be given precedence over the lower and showed in their lives what a wonderful harmony could be achieved thus. But they could only succeed in converting "a handful" to start with, because the bulk of humankind was not evolved enough even to wish for, far less claim, this deeper harmony of the Spirit. (Smiling) Ergo, through the over-assertion of the Mind's evolution the Soul's evolution was retarded, because the Mind, having grown into a Titan—or a Giant if you will—resisted its superior, the Soul, and questioned its will. But God refuses to be mocked and so behold the muddle overtaking your much-vaunted mental civilisation which chooses, in its growing folly, to prefer the dark and tortuous way of the mental ego to the sunlit and harmonious way of the Soul! But then again, evolution has only made such headway it has, through conflict and discord to a higher harmony.

WEST (sardonically): Only the trouble is, sir, that in the blur of the conflict the higher harmony stays all but invisible.

EAST (nodding): That is precisely why those few to whom it is still visible should be listened to and allowed to give the lead of Light—the lead of seers who see from the Soul the Promised land of Plenitude and Harmony. For until the Soul's eyes open, which may take a long time, it is only possible to see with the Mind. But then you have not had to wait so long after all—a few millenniums at most. Only remember that this glimpse was vouchsafed to quite a number of men even during this period of waiting, for the Vision of the Soul was given to a few who were ripe, almost at the very dawn of human civilisation, in India, six thousand years ago. Thereafter, thanks to multifarious clouds and storms, it receded from time to time, only to re-emerge untarnished, if not brighter than before.

WEST: But why did the One who had given the Vision sanction the clouds?

EAST: Because the clouds also had a part to play. Nothing is sanctioned by the One arbitrarily. Even the most seemingly-irrelevant happenings could not have happened had they served no purpose at all in the Divine Scheme. But in order to make the most of one's humble part in this vast cosmic drama, it is not necessary to be able to go to the ultimate why and wherefore of it all. Suffice it to say, therefore, that in blacking out the stars temporarily, the clouds and storms help to deepen the Soul's star-thirst and thus teach us a greater appreciation of the stars when they return after the clouds have dispersed. That is why Vyas said in the *Mahabharata:*

Kālena sarvaṁ vihitam Vidhātrā
Paryāya-yogena labhate manushyah.

The Lord ordains that none shall receive a boon
Till the hour comes when he is ripe: so man must wait.

WEST: But we, in the West, sir, are not like you in this respect: we don't relish waiting supinely. At least I can speak for myself: if I am destined for the starry fulfilment of the soul I must claim it as my birth-right.

EAST (smiling): You have never spoken more like an adult of the spirit. Only remember that the claim must be, to quote again one of your poets, "a cry that shivers to the tingling stars." That is to say: you must claim it not *among* other things, but *above* all other things, until the time comes when you can rest content with nothing less. A great Vaishnava Sage said: it is the one price you have to pay to win the Boon, the Pearl of pearls: *tatra laulyamapi mulyam ekalam.* In other words, if you can go all out claiming, coveting the Highest Boon for all you are worth, you will be granted it. Nothing else is needed.

WEST (incredulous): It sounds very splendid, sir, but if you will pardon me, it seems too good to be true. For we mental men, as you put it, have had to pay a much greater price even to win our kingdom of the Mind: we have

had to go on sweating and struggling and exploring and daring for years and years—adventuring, sifting, discovering, blundering, stumbling, sometimes, indeed, toppling into the abyss—bleeding and spent, but never giving up. (Proudly) Yes, sir, that is how we have built our great world-empire of the Mind, dazzling and majestic and—er—

EAST (helping out): Tottering as never before.

WEST (wincing): You may be great sir. but not quite—I don't know. (Pausing) I would be paltering with truth, I admit, if I were to deny that we—er—seem to have come to an—an inexplicable *impasse*, a dead end, for somehow something has gone wrong somewhere—otherwise (slowly) how could we have come to the *cul-de-sac* we have?

EAST: What does your Mr. Know-all, Mind, say hereanent?

WEST: You are pleased to be ironical, sir. But I still believe—or rather I simply can't believe—that Man who has known so much, explored so much, striven so much and—er—achieved such splendid things will insist eventually on suicide because he refuses to see that fear and hatred must be abolished.

EAST: Your diagnosis is wrong, for surely he won't *insist* on suicide, nor does he *refuse* to see that it is fear and hatred that are leading him relentlessly towards the Abyss. Only he can't win from his trusted monitor, Mind, the clue he is desperately seeking, namely, *how* to take the path that will lead him upwards to the heights? He can't—because it is impossible to get the right lead from the wrong pilot.

WEST: Impossible?

EAST: Are you not finding it impossible? On your own showing, you in Russia were scared stiff when war was in the air and the atom bomb in the offing, that weapon

which your own marvellously wise Guru, Mind, had devised with such infinite skill and pains. (Shaking his head). No, my friend: I am afraid, the way you are going is *not* the Way. Mind could have served you till the end if you had asked it only to minister to your physical and mental needs: but in your over-enthusiasm you have asked it to help you get round the ego which it can never do, because that is the Soul's function—not Mind's. But you cannot have it both ways: to be dominated by Mind and control the weapons with which alone it can dominate. So you see, you, the kings of creation who invented science, have now become the slaves of what science invented. It reminds me of a phrase in the Vedas: the eater himself is eaten.

WEST (flushing): I—I—er—don't quite get you, sir—

EAST: But how is that? Do you mean to say that you people don't see what is blatant as the blazes—the furies you have aroused by following the guidance of your majestic master, Mind? You let yourselves be imposed upon by its specious arguments which have made ignorance look like knowledge. The result: you woke the sleeping demons in the recesses of your collective ego, persuaded by the same Mind that these alone could save you. You have accepted its sophistries which justify greed, diplomacy and power and refuse even now to see where these have landed you—into what a vicious circle: Fear begets armaments, armaments beget more fear, more fear begets more armaments—and so it goes on, as it must, endlessly. (Smiles ruefully) Today man dreads man more than he ever dreaded the most formidable of beasts. You are digging deep in order to be sheltered against bombs manufactured with infinite love and labour by your much-vaunted Science—but in vain, alas, because the demon powers of doom which you have invoked are too strong. Nevertheless you continue the shouting of resounding slogans: to prepare for war is the only way to peace on earth and good-will toward men! How rich that sounds! For can one conceive of a greater lunacy than

this, that such pleas should be accepted as sane—nay, as the essence and summit of reasoned wisdom? And still, duped by the fallacies of the Ego, you go on boasting of your world-empire of Science! Somewhere, long ago, I read of a devotee—a Greek, I think—who said to his idol: "I will worship thee even if thou killest me." An impeccable sentiment, indeed—but only when the idol does not betray feet of clay.

WEST (raising his bowed head): I stand rebuked, sir. But ... well ... what is the way out of this —er— Bedlam?

EAST: The wisest among men told you—though you refused to listen: the way of the Soul. *Nanyah panthāh vidyate ayanāya:* there is no other road to the last Deliverance: to see God face to face and take orders from Him alone. This is what our Brahmins did of old—and they were listened to by the kings and the people in India. So it is not a Utopian ideal and can still serve for that of Man—if he will but consent to accept the Soul's lead as against the Mind's.

WEST (ruefully): But, sir, I have told you the crux of the trouble: it's that we can't spot the Soul *anywhere* when we look round. In other words, we don't understand *how* we can accept the lead of a Leader who insists on living in deep purdah. We simply *don't* understand, sir.

EAST: Of course, you don't—because you don't want to. Listen. The other day they retrieved a boy who had been kidnapped some twelve years ago by a she-wolf. The poor fellow had grown up in the wolves' den. He is now in a Lucknow hospital, but he clings to his old ways and simply will not be taught by his guardians even to walk, far less eat cooked food. Why? Evidently because he prefers to crawl on all fours and feed on raw flesh, isn't it? Similarly, when one has grown up in a certain climate, however bad, one cannot easily take kindly to a better one and often even revolts against the necessity of doing so.

Still, it can be done and it is seldom too late to mend. The mental man, having lived in Mind's cold climate of little lights, has all but ceased to believe that there may be another more conducive to his well-being and has let himself be fully persuaded that a more generous climate, where light is abundant is bad for the eyes. There is no falsehood but can be accepted as God's truth when it is repeated constantly in chorus by those around one. The mental man of today has had it dinned into his ears of late that the Soul is a myth and that what does not exist in the Mind's Koran can exist nowhere else. So he has come to accept it as self-evident, especially in the West. The *Gita* has it that one grows into the mould one cherishes: *yo yat shraddah sa eva sah.* That this is true becomes obvious when you contrast the attitude of our Hindu Intelligentsia with that of the masses. These last still believe in the Soul and God and the spiritual values, because they have not grown up in that climate of doubts and denial which the Intelligentsia adores. You must have noticed how many among the poorer pilgrims touch the Ganga's clay with their brows before they take their dip and how many bring their children and drop them at the feet of the sadhus. You may have seen also—as I have, many times—how the so-called educated among us poke fun at these poor people who come to the confluence to be purified and to the sadhus to be blest. The Soul of India lives in and through these, whom your Christ commended as the "meek". But the self-complacent Intelligentsia laugh the meek and the simple to scorn. It could hardly be otherwise. As you sow, so must you reap. If you go on refusing to accept every gospel but the Mind's, you will be shaped accordingly by its Chief Minister, Reason. Because this Minister, when cajoled by the senses and their little lights, can advocate any cause and make it look like the only one worth living and dying for. So, naturally, it can convincingly prove to you that every cult other than your own is rank idolatry.

WEST: I see that, sir, about the—er—diagnosis. But I happen to be more interested in the treatment of this fanaticism of Reason—if I may call it so.

EAST: You certainly may. But the treatment is plainly indicated in the diagnosis, to wit, if the mental man, the modern sceptic, truly seeks the Light of Liberation—*Mukti-jyoti*—from his pen of darkness—*Andha-kārā*, then he must try first to see it for a pen. The next step is to want—really to want—to find a way out of his attachment to the prison which holds him captive. The third step is to realise that to get rid of this attachment is no joke and the last—which is the most difficult for the proud modern—is to bring himself to go to those who have rid themselves of this attachment. So he must—as says our *Gita:*

Ask, serve and bow to those who have seen the Truth
And they, the illumined ones, will show your Light.

WEST: Ah, sir, there's the rub—as said our Hamlet. How and where are we to find such seers, that is the question. For in the West, at least, they seem to be rather conspicuous by their absence.

EAST: But you have only yourselves to thank for that. No crop can thrive on an alien soil. For you mustn't forget that you, too, had your share of the wise men—the saints and seers who knew what they were talking about. But in the unsympathetic climate of the sceptic Mind, which frowned upon them as suspects if not indeed as enemies within the gates, specially after the advent of scientific materialism, they wilted away because they found no *Lebens-saft*—no sap and sustenance of reverence for spiritual values. I believe, however, that they are still there in a state of seed and can flower out once more if you decide to cherish them again, as you should, as the highest and purest Light-bringers for mankind. For then you may once again be rewarded by the Light in return. At all events, that is how it has worked in India: the great

mystics—the sages, saints, seers and prophets—were venerated by the people and supported by the rulers; in return they gave the needed guidance to the rulers and made salutary laws for the people—salutary, in the sense of being conducive to the life of the Spirit. But what was still more remarkable from the historical point of view—though the cold eye of reason today feels somewhat baffled by it—was that even in the worst turmoils of social and political upheavals, the reverence of the rank and file for India's spiritual men remained warm and intact. Therefore, even when the people themselves were suffering the most bitter privations, the sadhus were still ministered to, and thus were able to go on doing what they alone could do, namely, invoking the Light which could redeem the hopelessness of the rest of mankind. The startled cry of the ultra-moderns of India—which is but an unthinking echo of the shout of Western Materialism—that it is excessive *dharma* and faith and reverence for the things of the Spirit which has wrought India's downfall is unmitigated nonsense. India degenerated not because of too much *dharma* but because—thanks to a play of forces, physical as well as occult, which are too complex to be surveyed even summarily—*adharma,* wrong-doing supervened. Here you may note another very remarkable phenomenon which is difficult to account for by the light of your materialistic reason. You, people, came very near to persuading us that India had fallen because of too much religiosity, plus the caste system. But even Pundit Jawaharlal Nehru, who looks at India more or less from the point of view of a Western Positivist, has had to concede, being honest, that it is the caste system which had prevented India from disintegrating. Of course I am not talking of the degenerate form of the caste system as it obtains today—with its doctrine of untouchability—but of what it was when, based on division of labour, heredity and temperament, it functioned properly. But that is another story. And then it was not the caste system alone, but the sum total of faith, of the veneration for saints, the

love of mythology, acceptance of our cherished traditions—in a word, a sturdy refusal to discard our spiritual values for the Godless materialism of the West—all this has helped India to survive through millenniums when many an empire has perished like bubbles. To sum up, India has survived cataclysms such as few countries have gone through, because though her body has often enough suffered grievously for lack of nourishment, her Soul never failed to draw sustenance from her tradition of reverence for the spiritual values. Not for nothing did our Lord assure us that even a fraction of *dharma's* light could rescue us from the fear of darkness: *swalpamapyasya dharmasya trāyate mahato bhayāt.* These are no mere words: even one seer who has seen Light can come as a saviour to a whole generation, as has been shown so luminously by the life of Sri Ramakrishna Paramahamsa.

WEST: I have read his talks with his disciples, entitled: *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna.* But you will pardon me, sir, if I say that it was not very clear to me what exactly his gospel amounted to. If it is that God can and should be seen, then the question asks itself: why has He made it so infernally difficult, if not impossible, to have even one interview with Him? Surely He should know that nobody likes to go on living in darkness, groping and stumbling and hurting himself constantly. Why then, in the name of mercy, doesn't He make His compassion a little more understandable to His own kith and kin as we are assured we are? If He has an ocean of Light and Bliss at His disposal, why has mankind, from the dawn of time, lived in dark and dismal deserts of despair, strife and pain relieved at best by a few oases utterly inadequate to this vast global thirst? And last, though by no means the least, why is it, I ask you, that we, moderns, have steadily grown not only to question His very existence—but actually to —er— mock at the glaring ineffectiveness of His divine omnipotence? (Suddenly) But pardon me sir, if I have unwittingly

perpetrated blasphemy. I really didn't mean to be frivolous—

EAST (smiling and unruffled): Unlike you, my friend, we in India have never believed in blasphemy. Our Lord has a sense of humour and can even afford to laugh with you when you laugh at Him. I freely confess though, that He is somewhat elusive by nature—at least that is what we have found Him to be whenever we have wanted to argue Him into behaving more sensibly. But never could we look upon Him as something too Divine to be able to take a human joke. At all events, in our land His devotees frequently testified that He even encourages them to have flings at His Divinity. To give but one instance in point: our *Bhagavat* has it that once our Lord Krishna playfully told his beloved consort, Rukmini, that He was, indeed, sorry for her, a Princess of high attainments, who, even when she could easily have chosen from a crowd of Princes, should have preferred a pauper (*nishkinchana*) like Him whose ways were, besides, so irrational as to be inscrutable. She had, in fact, to repent at leisure her foolish *karma* of marrying in haste. But she, the great lady, rose to the occasion and answered:

> Even the sages who have loved Thee, Lord,
> And contemplated Thy ways, in the end
> Behave in a manner which seems to us, poor humans,
> Inscrutable: so need Thou emphasise
> That Thou, their one ideal and exemplar
> Should by Thy conduct puzzle Thy fool appraisers?[1]

(Smiles) She did hit the nail on the head, didn't she? And if only to understand her import a little better, take your own case. Here you are—a mighty apostle of understanding with a sharp intellect that can cut through anything however tough and resistant to analysis—yet, for all your scientific penetration, you have utterly failed to understand

[1] *The Bhagavat*, X. 60. 36.

even your own Christ whose strange views (about peace and poverty and meekness and the lilies that neither spin nor take thought for the morrow) you have come to reject as baffling! So how can I hope to make our conception of the Lord, or of His greatest Incarnation—Krishna, the God-man—acceptable to your reason seeing that He never believed in appealing to Reason, the great pleader, to come to His rescue and justify His ways to Man? It simply couldn't be done—He Himself having given you full liberty to decide for yourself whether your own ways are saner than His. So you are free to march proudly to such goals as the Mind boosts—whether it be of one world, or one State, or one Art, or one dictatorship. He sanctions even your genuflecting to science preaching atheism if you feel that its researches alone can deliver the goods you think you want. As for us, fool mystics, our die is cast: we have elected the other way—the seemingly irrational one—of commending our souls to the keeping of One whom we cannot even understand, far less question: we just believe in His pledge that He will give us rest and fulfilment if we can trust His word and take refuge in Him alone. Our position is simple: the position of love and faith and humility and submission, we being firmly persuaded that He knows what He is doing and how, even though we don't or, at best, know hopelessly little. We covet neither knowledge nor power to lead the world: we just pray for sight and strength to be able, first and last, to perceive and do His will unquestioningly. The long and short of it is that we, the sadhus of India, have never argued as you have, namely, that we have first got to justify God's ways to man before we can succeed in making him a God-believer. For we have been persuaded all along that, in the last analysis, His ways can never truly commend themselves to the Mind of Reason. (Pausing for breath) Only one thing I will tell you, from personal experience: that one who has contacted Him even for a brief spell knows that His ways may be inscrutable—even indefensible to such as we—but they are

anything but "ineffective". He may not often choose to come, but when He does, He descends less like the gentle dew from heaven than like an avalanche which takes the breath away. Listen: I will tell you a rather effective story of Sri Ramakrishna's. There was a learned pundit who, somewhat like you, enjoyed having flings at Him. One day a devotee of the World-Mother, Kali, was in raptures describing how the Great Mother had revealed Herself to him in all her incredible glory. The pundit laughed derisively. "What is all this nonsense?" he challenged. "Pooh! Just a phantom figure born out of the fever of fervour. I have seen through the whole comedy. It is all mere froth. I defy her to appear before me and you will see what you will see." He was going on ranting in this strain when—lo, Mother Kali Herself appeared before him in all Her resplendent glory and the poor challenger was so utterly overwhelmed that, in his ecstasy, he could only babble out "Kaa—Kaa—Kaa" like a lisping child, as you too probably would were she to erupt before you right now out of a blue sky.

WEST (nettled): You do me a grave injustice, sir! I could never behave in a maudlin way—never, come what may, any more than I could believe in such a thing as your Kali sweeping down on me out of a blue sky. (Chafing) Besides, your Sri Ramakrishna may have been a great saint but surely he wasn't infallible. So how can one be sure that when he saw the Mother, as he claimed, he saw before him the —er— Dynamic Creatress of the world? How can I accept such apparitions till they are proved home to me as sheer reality? I—

EAST: Just a moment, what do you exactly mean by the phrase "sheer reality"?

WEST: Well ... er ... I mean objective reality—something tangible. What I am driving at is ... what the mystics saw might very well have been like the figures seen in a dream ... that is, mere ... er ... irised bubbles

which are real to the dreamer alone—and then only while he is dreaming. No psychologist will accept such testimonies as *establishing* the existence of the things visioned. He will at best award that it is a subjective experience valid only for the subject. If the Divine exists and can at will appear in such forms then—well, then—these must first be attested as real—concrete. (Pausing for breath) Excuse me for going off like this, sir. But tell me one thing: Do you really mean to say, seriously, that the modern man's insistence on conclusive evidence when testing reality is wrong?—that we have to take things on trust, surrendering ourselves to hearsay or mere authoritarianism? After all there *are*—as you, too, must admit—such things as fantasy, hallucinations—phantoms crystallising out of —er— auto-suggestion or self-hypnotism or—

EAST: Not so fast, my friend. Any truly spiritual man who has had even a modicum of such experiences will tell you that there are visions and visions and that you must win to a certain amount of discrimination and intuition before you can winnow out the chaff from the corn. But the premise that there are will-o'-the-wisps doesn't surely warrant the inference that there is no such thing as the lodestar. You, Westerners, are harping all the time on the "real". But how, I ask you, would you tell the "real" from "fantasy"? It cannot be by the verdict of the senses since your own Guru, Science, warns you that your senses are not infallible judges and that what is real to the trained mind is unreal to the untrained and *vice versa*. The same is true (and in a far deeper sense) about spiritual verities. As Lord Krishna puts it in the *Gita:*

> The Sage keeps vigil when all men sleep: in the night,
> And calls that night what they hail as daylight.[2]

Which simply means that what seems palpable to the ignorant is illusive to the Sage and conversely. So,

[2]*Yā nisha sarvabhutanām tasyam jagarti samyami.*
Yasyām jāgrati 'bhutānisā nishā pashyto muneh. (2.69)

naturally, the Sage accepts as valid—from the testimony of his own consciousness—what seems unacceptable to those others who have not attained to *his* vision. As the observers view from two different planes, between which the gulf can never be bridged, the verdicts must differ. Look at what happened to your great martyrs in the West: Socrates was condemned to death as a corrupter of youth; the Christ was crucified; Eckhart was charged with heresy by officers of the Inquisition and died under a shadow—after his appeal had been rejected. You surely don't plead that since the majority held them suspect, therefore their judgment was right? But why was it not right, I ask you? There can be only one answer: because the ones who live in a lesser consciousness are incompetent to judge those who act from a higher one. This being so, how can you presume to test the validity of the mystics' findings—you who have yet to know what happens to those who, living in God, see what they do and act as they must? How can you assay *their* vision of Reality on the touchstone of *your* lesser seeing and sense-bound perceptions? To give but one instance—though it is by no means original: the delight of conjugal love you know yourself—as you are deeply attached to your wife. Now it is vividly real to an adult in love, you admit that, don't you? Right: but is it at all real to a boy of eight? What then? Suppose the boy, following your cue, chose to dismiss conjugal love as self-hypnotism or auto-suggestion on the ground that it was anything but real to him, would you pat him on the back for his logic or acumen? If not, how can you, rationally, challenge the reality of the mystic's experience on the naïve argument that it seems unreal or fantastic to you? The only thing you can do, rationally, is to suspend your judgment till you have some direct experience of *his* consciousness.

WEST (nettled): If you will pardon me, sir, the child-versus-adult simile re conjugal love is clever but not so

convincing as it sounds. For the child grows almost automatically from his juvenile consciousness into the adult's and so, comparing the two, decides that the latter *is* superior. But here am I—a full-grown adult already, and I believe .... you'll forgive my presumption .... at least as intelligent as any mystic who has walked on two legs .... yet —er— I know no more today of what you call the mystic consciousness than I did when I was a boy of eight!

EAST (raising his eyebrows): Woe to the mystic, poor dear! He should have known better than to have succeeded where *you* failed! Pardon me, in your turn, but surely you, being as "intelligent" as you are, cannot possibly fail to see that although there are some things one can know almost without much conscious effort, there are others which one can get to know only after a hard study and prolonged self-discipline. You have grown "intelligently" for years without knowing much about anatomy—or about how your different internal organs function. But a doctor knows because he has studied such things and so, when you are sick, can tell you much more about what you are suffering from and why than you can yourself—even though, mind you, it is *your* body and not his. Similarly with mystic experience: if you had undergone the arduous self-discipline the mystic has, you would have evolved into his larger consciousness and seen for yourself what he has achieved: namely, a deeper and more comprehensive knowledge of occult and spiritual forces than the non-mystic's.

WEST (obstinately): You do not get me, sir. It was no part of my intention to aver dogmatically that I could not possibly have learned a thing or two about psychology if I had chosen to concentrate on it as, say, a psychiatrist does. But how do I know that it would have made me into a superior—a better man?

EAST: I don't get you either. We were not talking of moral values but of the spiritual. I submitted that the

mystic grows into a superior consciousness which does not, necessarily nor primarily, aim at improving one's morals, any more than scientific knowledge does—even though, mind you, the moral improvement may accrue to him as a by-product. To give an analogy: anybody who has truly loved knows that one loves because one can't help loving and not because one wants to be happy through loving, even though happiness may come to the lover afterwards—as a corollary to his love. So it is with a genuine mystic: he does not aspire after mystic knowledge to become a "better man" but simply because he can't help aspiring for what calls to him. In fact when he feels impelled to stake everything for what attracts him, he does not even stop to think whether or no it will make a "better man" of him from the moral point of view: all he is concerned with is —how to attain what he longs to attain, heart and soul, and till this becomes his ruling passion he cannot be called the hundred-percent mystic which he must want to become if he is to be true to his call.

WEST (perturbed): I see ... But ... but then, sir, do I understand that a mystic may see better but behave worse than a non-mystic? For if it be so, then I would rather live on my moral plane all my life.

EAST: Your mind is confused. I never said that the mystic, in actual fact, behaves worse than a scoundrel. If you read the lives of the saints the world over, you will find that all the major mystics have been much more compassionate, understanding, tolerant, forgiving, pure-hearted, kind, chaste and loving than their most moral and humanitarian contemporaries. St. Francis, St. Theresa, St. Augustine, Jacob Boehme, Fra Angelico, St. Bernard, Eckhart, Ruysbroeck, Sri Chaitanya, Sri Ramakrishna and others—not to mention Buddha, Christ, Socrates in the distant past—were surely not less moral than any of their contemporaries.

WEST: What about Krishna?

EAST (smiling): I will not walk into your snare. For Krishna stands in a class by Himself. He cannot be understood by discussion intellectual or otherwise. Only those who have heard His magic Flute—and supremely blessed are they—can have even a glimpse of His *Vishwarupa,* the Deep in the drop, the Sun in the ray, the Infinity in a speck. And even they can know but an infinitesimal part of the great Mystery which He was—nay, *is*—for all time. But even when one knows that much, one is liberated for ever because then one realises that one thing alone is worth knowing: that He cannot be appraised but only accepted, to be accepted back by Him. And this can be best achieved in a hushed surrender of all our conception of right and wrong, virtue and sin, even light and darkness. (Smiling ruefully) I know I am sounding cryptic, but then you let yourself in for it. You may even think that you have won since I confess freely that I can no more explain Krishna than I can explain why the universe is what it is and not something else. If you want to know the interpretation of Krishna in our scriptures—such as it is—you may turn to the *Bhagavat;* but I wonder if it would help you to understand His message unless it were given to you to hear His mystic Flute. For then only could you see the utter futility of all endeavour except one: to surrender all you have and are at His feet and to want nothing in return except to be possessed by Him, utterly and irrevocably—as the Gopis did. (He wipes a tear, and then smiles). You may now, if you like, go home and say I was no match for you in that I capitulated as soon as you challenged me to vindicate Him. But mind you, if you asked me how you were to love Him and compel Him to accept you I would be able to answer.

WEST (strangely moved): Suppose I nodded? Would you continue—I mean, just go on? For somehow you have made me feel ... I don't know how to put it ... But you have ... it seems, sir, somewhat ... disarmed me even

though, curiously, all that you have said just now couldn't possibly make any appeal to my reason. All the same please go on—do tell me something more about this Krishna of yours.

EAST (with a pleased smile): It happened years ago, when I was living in a small hut on the Ganga—near Rishikesh. I was passing through a barren time—in point of fact I had almost come to a dead end. I did not know what to do till at last I decided just to pray to Him to accept me—nothing more. I had tried hard to read up all there was to be read, but in vain: I felt as dry and empty as a husk. So, in despair, I prayed confessing that I had realised it to be no use trying to know Him. I was feeling sore and baffled and tears fell from my eyes, when—lo, I saw to my amazement, that I was not there at all—it was Krishna crying! I was thrilled but I could not believe it! All my pain had gone and I was replete with an ecstasy which no words can describe. But still I could not understand how Krishna who was (tapping his own chest) me—this *me,* could cry for Himself, to be accepted by Himself—through me which, withal, was not *me* since it was Krishna! And yet I wondered in *me* though in wondering, too, I thrilled. I got up and walked along the Ganga. But it was not I who was walking but the Krishna in me! Suddenly He said: "Now today I won't let you eat anything." I came back to my little hut—or rather, Krishna did, walking on my twin legs—and a disciple offered me a glass of milk. Suddenly I saw, in amazement, that it was no disciple but Krishna Himself serving me! I drank—but no, it was Krishna drinking the milk! And then my disciple, too, drank off a glass of butter-milk but it was not *he*—only Krishna drinking! I asked him who he was. He didn't understand my question. But again it was not *he* but Krishna who was saying: "I don't know what you mean, Gurudev!" And then I was not asking either: it was Krishna who was wagging *my* tongue! (Pausing) And

all this was not a meaningless phenomenon, a miracle which just took your breath away and then left you high and dry back to the *status quo* of your ignorance. On the contrary, it changed my entire outlook on life as I saw in a flash what the ancients had meant when they declared that the person to whom such a revelation is given achieves Immortality. For I realised then, to my joy, that since Krishna was not only my soul but my body as well, I could die no more because *I* was not I but Krishna Himself! (Smiling) There, I have told you, and I hope you won't run to a doctor to get me certified as "a lunatic too dangerous to be at large."

WEST (laughing): I am not quite the fool I look, sir. For don't I know that if I went to a doctor to get you certified, he would be more likely to certify me instead and then come straight here to fall at your feet to atone for his having listened to such blasphemy?—But to be serious: I confess I don't quite know how to interpret your experience. Nevertheless I ask you to believe, sir, that I do not discredit your testimony. Only tell me one thing: I have told you—I hope humbly, this time—that I cannot understand the import of your experience. Now, what do you advise me to do?—Simply go about telling people that I met a very truthful mystic, an authentic saint, who told me how vividly he had realised Immortality through such and such a vision or experience? For I am afraid, if I do that, they will only say, with raised eyebrows, that sadhus excel in talking beautiful drivel which gets you nowhere.

EAST (smiling): If you felt inclined to report what I have told you just to convey its descriptive beauty to your audience, it might not be so bad provided you did not add by way of comment: "This is what he told me fluently and beautifully; poor fellow, he has such a touching faith in phantasmagoria!" (Dropping his voice) But listen: if you or any of your friends accept that such a revelation *can* be true, you have gained in humility and so may be induced to suspend your judgment till you know more—which will

certainly be a helpful attitude. But as you have asked my advice, personally, I might suggest: why not try to tread the spiritual path for a change—since you are so keen—and verify it all for yourself? For if you do, you will see that, far from being content with a little bit of beautiful talk about the Divine Reality, the true mystic prefers to be silent till he *knows*. In other words, no true mystic is satisfied till he is satisfied. In fact, he is much more finical than your scientist-rationalist and ambitious, besides.

WEST: Ambitious? The mystic?

EAST: Would you not call one ambitious who is not satisfied till he sees that he, a speck of specks, can claim kinship with the King of kings, singing *"Shivoham, Shivoham"*—I am the Lord Himself!—till he sees, more vividly than you see devils through your microscope, the Divine in all and all in the Divine—the *Vishwarupa* with his eyes of love lit with His Light?

WEST: Well, sir ... you refer again to this *Vishwarupa* of yours ... I wonder if our Western Illuminates did not convey the same experience by the term Beatific Vision. I think our mystic, Jacob Boehme, wrote about it in his great book, *Aurora*—if my memory does not fail me. In any event, in this remarkable autobiography, which he wrote with an astonishing clarity and precision, he has recorded one experience which did, indeed, impress me at the time—though I could not quite take it at its face value—because it—er—just took one's breath away! But still he made on me the impression he did because .... unlike many another mystic, he was crystal-clear and cogent: he never beat about the bush but went straight to the point and averred not only that he had seen God by a miraculous light, but that thenceforward he went on seeing Him in each separate thing—in man and animals, plants and particles! That reminds me: Blake too had similar visions, I think—the reason perhaps why he held that "if our doors of perception were cleansed, everything would appear to

man as it is, infinite". I used once to pore over the lives of the mystics of the West—but it was long ago when I still had a touching faith in the wisdom of books. But that is (shaking his head ruefully) neither here nor there. What I want to ask you, sir, is.... I really don't know how to put it in words.... but (desperately) can you possibly explain to me what it all really means?

EAST (suppressing a smile): My friend, let me ask you a counter-question: Is it not true that one may ask a question without being sufficiently grown-up or competent enough to understand the answer? The fact of your wanting to know about something does not necessarily entitle you to understand what you wish to know. A great artist may go to a great scientist and ask what the theory of relativity means. Can the latter explain it to him satisfactorily? Is not some scientific education, some previous grounding in scientific outlook, indispensable to even a rudimentary understanding of the higher and subtler scientific theories? Similarly, the scientist may be unable, on his side, truly to understand the artist's perceptions about art. Boiled down, it comes to this that you can only understand what you are evolved enough to understand at any given stage of your growth.

WEST: Excuse me, sir... but doesn't this look very much like evasion?

EAST: *Mais que voulez-vous, mon ami*—since the question you have just put is about a Vision which was given to one of your greatest mystics who, though a shoemaker and a comparatively uneducated man, could baffle most of his contemporary scholastics and dignitaries and make them look foolish! (Smiling) Naturally they resented it—for nobody likes to feel inferior—and so they hounded him out of his native town twice and got him imprisoned once. Now why did all this persecution have to happen? Was it not simply because the Vision which had been given to his soul could only be misjudged by those who tried to under-

stand it with the mind? That this must happen has been seen more clearly by our Yogis in India than by your mystics in Europe. That is why our great sages have kept the deeper discoveries of the Spirit carefully hidden from those who were not receptive. You will find in our scriptures that the great prophets often warned their disciples not to reveal the lore to all and sundry—an injunction which has been grievously misunderstood by your democratic idealists who branded it as an esoteric cult. But it isn't that at all—it's simply the wisdom which foresees the danger of telling people things before they are ripe for knowledge. So our mystics, seeing that they could not reveal all that the Beatific Vision imported to those who could not grasp it, did the next best thing, namely, to lure those few who *could* be lured by descriptions of the beauty and bliss that stemmed from the Vision. And they achieved this with remarkable success, thanks to the richness of the Sanskrit language which—being a highly evolved medium of expression—could convey at least something of the mystic ecstasy if not the nature of the mystic vision which induced it. For this they had to take the help of symbols and imagery and the magic power of the Sanskrit rhythm which thrilled even when it mystified. But even then, mind you, they only really succeeded with a handful. For though many were impressed, only a few were impelled, sufficiently electrified, to respond to their vibrant clarion-call: "*Uttishthata jāgrata prāpya barān nibodhata*—awake, arise and, accepting the lead of Light, become Illuminates!" But even for these few it was not easy, because to respond truly to the Love supreme one *has* to give up the lesser loves. In other words, renunciation was imperative and only those could renounce the lesser loves who had been partially disenchanted—who had felt the pointlessness of this *maya* of reason, luxury, comfort, attachments, power and vainglory. This disenchantment has been described by our much-misunderstood word, *vairagya* which cannot be translated by such negative terms as escapism or earth-

averseness. For *vairagya,* as Sri Ramakrishna aptly emphasised, is not a mere distaste for the world but must be instinct with that deeper taste and longing for what the earth-life can never give—the positive fulfilment in love and light which mortality can not mar—which beckons, but alas, eludes, giving rise to that everlasting sigh of the Soul: *"Yenāham nāmritā syām kimaham tena kuryām*—what shall I do with all this mummery of pomp if it fails to give me Immortality?" But our great seers were not content with the mere voicing of this *vairagya:* they persuaded us by the power of Light and Love which they had achieved that the sigh was not a mere turning away from life but the precursor to turning towards the One who alone could fulfil it. The thirst for the Unattainable would not have been implanted in us if the Unattainable had not *wished* to be attained. Or to give another image: it is because there is in every soul the divine spark which yearns to be reunited with its parent Fire through the circuit of Love, that man, evolving out of his sheer animality, has been an immemorial pilgrim of Divinity: the moth cries for the star because in its core there *is* a starry twinkle which longs to fulfil itself by meeting its kin on high. The sages accepted this yearning as valid because it led to the coveted meeting. The proof they did have, even as others could, but only *after* the meeting, not before. So what they asked you to do—that is, if you were a real seeker—was simply to start from your thirst, since then, as they knew from indubitable experience, you would reach the Nectar of Immortality—the Purna Kumbha of Bliss and Silence—which could be experienced but never be more than hinted at even by the richest symbols or images.

WEST (impressed): So you advise, I take it, that I start by accepting your testimony so that I may end by verifying the verifiable? Hm. (Looking at him quizzically) I begin to think, sir, that there may after all be a method in your madness.

EAST (bowing): Thank you for your blessing, my amiable friend. But we suggest the method, if only you will have the good sense to recognise it, not only because it is approved by madness alone but by sanity as well. To be more precise, we ask you—that is, if you really mean business when you ask for advice—to accept only this much that the Divine is realisable and worth realising—because otherwise you will wander everlastingly on the periphery without coming so much as one step nearer the centre. But remember: mere admission of this possibility, though it may well serve as a starting-point, cannot carry you very far unless you follow it up and knock at His gate—knock and knock and knock till you are blue in the face. For only then will you be admitted into the intimacies of His *milan*—full union—the only bliss that can sustain you in this life and take you across its dark and moaning waters.

WEST: But is that all? I mean—can I never hope to see any deep meaning in it all?

EAST: You can—but not till you have met Him face to face. For once you have met Him there, you will meet Him here as well—and then you will see the world in a totally different light, a light that will transform the whole landscape, because seeing in all the All-in-all, you will be delivered from the stranglehold of destiny. But for such a consummation to be compassed, you must first shed your pride of knowing and unlearn much that you have learned—much that is really ignorance masquerading as knowledge, the phantom wisdom of the worldy-wise, since it cannot even tackle the world. And then you will see the pointlessness of the fuss made by the Mind, in sheer ignorance, about accepting things on trust, on faith. For you will see that the faith was there in your blood, the trust in your marrow—only a faint reflection of which made you accept your parents, elders and teachers and helped you grow from day to day. In India people have also trusted the sadhus—the tradition has helped them, and that is why India is India,

still radiating faith in a world which is dark and distraught with doubts. And she can help still by inspiring you to walk firmly to the Goal, the Supreme Discovery, beside which all your material discoveries look pale as the moon before the sun.

WEST: I see. (Pausing) So, in a nutshell, there is no other way than to take the path of faith enjoined by authority. For that is what it comes to, doesn't it?

EAST: Yes and no. Yes, because, as I have said just now, you cannot possibly get anywhere if you refuse to accept all aid from tradition and the experience of those around you; no, because none but a fool would ever follow an authority if it led nowhere. As I said before, the mystics were no fools. If they have, with one voice, enjoined faith—that is, believing *before* seeing—it is because it is a verifiable fact that faith leads, step by step, up to Realisation. *You* wonder at faith. But *we* wonder how you, as rational beings, can wonder in face of the hundreds of mystics who have led men out of the dark wood of Doubt by the Light of their Vision, who have inspired thousands of seekers and sometimes even changed the course of history by the impact of their radiant personalities?

WEST (thoughtfully): I begin to see, sir—though it is still little more than a pencil ray in the thick darkness.... (Suddenly) Shall I make a confession? (Hesitantly) You see, sir, I had all along sincerely wanted to believe in the *clichés* of Reason and Science and what not, but as time passed, I began to grow a little restive because, with all their tall talk, they did not deliver the goods; my heart knew no rest; the Promised Land loomed as far-off as ever. Nevertheless they went on claiming and vaunting that science had achieved in a century what religion could only stare at with incredulity. It is true that science has served

us well. But when all is said and done, we have *not* been able to find any lasting fulfilment in the gospel of universal bread and increasing luxury of living because paradoxically, luxury, once it becomes a habit, almost ceases to be a luxury. What is worse is that you miss it only when you lose it but you cannot enjoy it vividly—or rather, it thrills the less the more you go on flirting with it. In a word, the endless raising of the standard of living—supposing, for argument's sake, such a thing were feasible—cannot be a true gospel. I then turned to our mystic literature, but, not being able to discern, in the West, any truly great spiritual personalities who could make the mystic truths living for the likes of us—I stayed unconvinced. But dash it all, you can't expect a fellow to go on living happily in a void on the wonderful argument that it is modern and not medieval! But what to do? Where to turn? It so happened that at this time I met a monk of the Ramakrishna Mission. His face impressed me. He had somehow achieved his faith. I questioned him and he answered that Sri Ramakrishna's talks had given him faith. I read the book in translation and though it appeared somewhat —er— quaint, even fantastic, it moved me unaccountably. He said somewhere that to have faith one must consort with those who have achieved it, or something to that effect. This young man told me that those who could really help me in my dilemma were the sadhus in India, but not the common type of sadhu, for only God-realised sadhus could give me the needed light, even as his own Guru had. But as this Guru —a direct disciple of Sri Ramakrishna's—had died some years ago, I asked him to name me another. "That would not be right," he said, "because you cannot truly profit by the guidance of somebody who has not made an impression on you". I was rather struck by the remark and came out to India. But alas, I have met nobody here who has made a definite impression on me. I was thinking of returning home, when I read in the papers about the congregation of sadhus. I felt like singing hallelujah and flew here last

week. But here, too, I have felt rather nonplussed till, suddenly, I saw you this morning. (Smiling) So I came and saw—though I cannot say that I have been conquered —at least, not yet.

EAST (smiling): Don't be afraid—you will remain unconquered and argue still for some years yet. But joking apart, I must tell you that we, in India, don't believe in converting or conquering people. We can recommend but never insist. Besides, I can only speak of what I know, and I know very little. But I can tell you this, from my experience, that (smiling) the one Friend whom you have treated so far as an alien if not an enemy, the Soul, was responsible for your satiety. And it has always been like this with everybody: the turning to the life of the Spirit always dates from the soul's awakening. A man begins then by feeling in his heart an emptiness, a *vairagya,* an incipient distaste for things that have so far held him. This grows with time and with it his psychic restlessness. But still he does not see his way clear. So he goes to those who have more or less impressed him and inspired his confidence —and asks their advice. They understand because they have themselves gone through this experience of *vairagya* and because—following the guidance of a human guru or of the Guru in the heart—they have arrived at the remedy after deep vicissitudes. They can guide you on your way; they can warn you off the pitfalls that lie hidden; they can prepare you for the black storms and clouds which must overtake all pilgrims intermittently. But at the same time, they will tell you, while giving you faith and strength in your hour of need, that a long search is imperative; that you cannot have salvation by proxy any more than you can walk on another's legs; that you can neither win any laurels worth the winning nor appreciate their worthwhileness until you have paid for them and, lastly, that if you are set on the final prize, you will have to stake everything you hold dear on earth, sometimes, which is perhaps the hardest of

all, even your good name. It is only when you have fulfilled all these conditions that you can expect to have an abiding assurance of His Knowledge in your life and the sustaining sweetness of His Love in your heart.

WEST: We know, to our cost, that you can't get anything worthwhile unless you are prepared to pay for it in some form or other. We know also that impatience will not do since the way *is* long. But what about faith, sir? That is where *we* stumble—I mean we, the truth-seekers of the West. For with us faith can only be tentative—not unconditional.

EAST (smiling): Few are those blessed mortals who can start with the "unconditional faith" lighting their path. The mystics know this. They do, indeed, posit faith as one of the prerequisites to spiritual attainment, but they know also that the perfect, unconditional faith is given to very very rare seekers. Most of us have to start with just this initial "tentative faith" which grows from a faint glow till it becomes luminous and unwavering by the progressive descent of the Light of His Grace. So, even if you have no more than a "tentative faith", you can arrive, provided you have the will to the "unconditional faith"—that is to say, the resolution to discourage doubts when they arrive. Only you must have the sincere will to dismiss the doubts and not flirt with them on any plea while you wait for the lights on the way to get brighter and brighter. For the last illumination must come to one who plods on doggedly. In other words, if you are ready to set out on your Quest this "tentative faith", you will surely end by gaining the "unwavering faith" as you move on—when your sincerity will have opened your being more to His Grace and thus enable you to see deeper into the heart of the Great Reality. Thereafter you will be able to verify for yourself all that our predecessors verified in theirs. Only one thing they will ask you to accept, trusting the evidence of everyone who has gone before you, namely, that the

Divine is resident in your heart as the "last lustre that glows stationed beyond the Darkness—*jyotishāmapi taj-jyotistamasah paramuchchyate.*" Then you will see that He can be the strongest of your props if only you will turn to Him and say that you rely on His strength more than on your own. For then you will discover that you always had the faith which was enjoined on you, even though it may sound to you *now* as a paradox. Apropos, my friend, the deepest truths of life must appear paradoxical until you have learnt to contemplate them from the Soul's standpoint as against the Mind's: *e.g.* statements such as, He is static as well as dynamic, One as well as Many, far as well as near and so on. Such trenchant statements as that things cannot be black as well as white or painful as well as delightful, may be true from the logical standpoint but are untenable from that of the supra-logical. In the last analysis, it is all a question of consciousness. But I have divagated. What I was stressing was that you are not asked by the mystics to hark back to something extraneous and outlandish for help because you have only to look within to be able to find that you had been equipped with all that you needed—like the mother's milk which is ready for you the moment you turn to her, "an infant crying in the night." The only thing you have to do—for this none can do *for* you—is to choose the path you have to tread: the path of Light. But there again, this path is not outside you but waits for you within you to be discovered by "turning your gaze inward"—*avrittachakshu* as the Upanishads put it. You have to do this, as the soul's deepest treasures can only be revealed to this "inward gaze." And you may be sure that all who have thus searched within one-pointedly, have been led, step by step and via greater and greater discoveries, to the last, the Supreme Revelation: "*Yadeveha tedamutra yadamutra tadanwiha*—the One who is there is here even as one who is there is here"—in other words, it is not as if you had to go *somewhere else* to find Him. When you experience this vividly—when you feel that not only all your thoughts and

aspirations are perceived and answered by Him—when you feel His Grace which pervades the spaces and yet takes a personal interest in the minutest of your achievements and failures, pain and joy, hopes and despondencies—when you meet Him literally in all that is, see His Face in all faces, hear His Voice in all voices, perceive His fragrance in all perfumes and His caress in all touches—what happens then? Simply that the ego, which acted as a veil, recedes and you come to stay in blissful union with Him living in (he shivers in ecstasy) His magic Presence, delivered from duality and pain, since there is nothing left to curtain him off from your enraptured gaze: "*tatra ko mohah kah shokah ekatwam anupashyatah*—how can there be any illusion or sorrow when you see the One everywhere?" (He suddenly comes to and shakes his head, smiling) But no, my friend, I was carried away and forgot that here words avail not, because you cannot even imagine such an experience from its description, however inspired and vivid, any more than you can win warmth from a painted fire however beautifully painted. The mystic can at best impart to you a fraction of the rapture he feels, but the sense of fulfilment, the ecstasy that cannot contain itself, the overwhelming wonder of the incredible phenomenon—all this has to be experienced to be believed. But whether you care to experience it yourself must depend, first and last, on yourself—on your free choice. If you feel that you can do without such a miraculous self-transcendence and stay satisfied with what and where you are, you are welcome to your little living, or at best your artistic dramatising with pain and penury, darkness and doom, sinking and stagnation. We, mystics, have elected to follow the path which not only leads to Light and Liberation, but for which we have deemed it worthwhile to bid farewell to the lesser loves which gave us over to disharmony and frustration. You are of course free to laugh at us and go your own way, deluding yourself with the make-believe that you can get all you ask from this so-called "tangible" world of yours. But it is the universal

experience of all—mystics and materialists are here at one, thank heaven—that the world as it is, the Siren Maya, can satisfy us up to a point and help us evolve up to a certain stature but no more, for He who has made man has fore-ordained that man shall know no rest till he has finally "rent the bonds of Death by achieving Immortality—*Tameva jnātwā mrityupāṣhān chhinatti*".

WEST (after a pause): You have touched a chord in me somewhere, sir. I don't really know what to think. For the Call you have heard cannot have been a false one—that much I can see. Your face, your voice—in fact what you have become does wield a strange authority. And yet ... I do not know, I am still divided. Perhaps it is because we have lived too long under a particular flag to be able to exchange it for one which seems far-off if not unattainable. But perhaps it is habit which makes us .... unsure. For we, in the West, have come to look askance at what we call —turning away from life. We feel, somehow, that this withdrawal, however blissful in itself, is a sign of—er—weakness; that this other-worldliness and harking back to something we have overpassed ... this appeal to an outside Agent, however wise and wonderful, to come to our rescue is unmanly. Can a philosophy of escapism truly serve in the world to which we are born .... a world which clings to us with its haunting beauty—which we simply cannot bring ourselves to dismiss as illusion? And then there is the question of dignity also, isn't there? We are persuaded that Man must stand on his own legs and not petition tearfully an extra-cosmic Prop to help him bear the burden the cosmos has imposed. In other words, we say that it is humanity to which we must turn for the giving as well as the receiving of help. I do not know ... for you have shaken me to my foundations ... but still .. well ...

EAST (sympathetically): I understand your difficulty, my friend, and I assure you that although you are still under a misconception with regard to the gospel of mysti-

cism at its loftiest, the greatest mystics are with you up to a point. For they also hold that you must not turn to what you call the "extra-cosmic Prop" in order to be able to escape the heavy burden which Love must and will bear. The greatest mystics have been the greatest lovers of mankind. Only, they are not nearly as sentimental as your humanists. It is written that the Buddha did *not* want to merge into the last *Nirvan* till there remained a single soul on earth who was still suffering from pain and cravings. He said that any one who has attained the bliss of *Nirvan* must make it available to all because he must love all even as a mother loves her only child. Your Christ was, surely, another *avatar* of Divine compassion. He came to save his brethren by the Gospel of Love. I will not talk about Krishna for then I should have to talk all day and yet not finish. But one thing I will stress: He came to this world with all the Powers of the Divine because He wanted to establish *dharmarajya*—what your Christ called the Kingdom of Heaven—on this disharmonious, evil-ridden world. But they, and the lesser Messiahs who followed, did not hold, as you do, that man must be self-sufficient, because that was *not* the remedy. Man must be manly, as you in the West have so nobly put it. God helps those who help themselves—you have never been more prophetic. The mystics only add that to be truly manly, man must transcend his human limitations. For only then will he be able to bear the burden of others. Yet such is the *maya*—the trick—of the human ego, that he likes to think that he can be both self-sufficient and able to carry out all that is expected of him. (Smiling) Shall I tell you something startling? Even I was once all but converted to your way of thinking and to wondering if this over-emphasis of ours on living for and in God was right. There was a time—I was a student in England then—when I became enamoured of the rational humanism of the West. I remember how

one night I could not sleep after reading the admonition of one of the your famous poets:

Know then thyself, presume not God to scan:
The proper study of mankind is man.

I do not know why this made such a sudden impression on me, but I took it as a personal rebuke, gave up studying mathematics and the European languages and turned avidly to history, anthropology and Western psychology. But the trouble was, that the more I studied what you, in the West, have unearthed about Man, the less did I grasp what he was —because I found no answers to the three fundamental questions which vexed my mind: why are we born, how are we to grow to our full stature and lastly, whither are we driving at this breakneck speed? I was in a dilemma. For though I loved India's message of the Spirit too well to wish to exchange it for the Western message of Mind and this-worldliness, yet I found myself powerfully drawn, at this phase of my life, by the vitality of the rational materialism and science which had enabled the West to dominate the world. But alas, I could not, for the life of me, feel that the West was as wise as it was virile. So I was deeply unhappy till, one day—strange as it may sound to you—I read a story which gave me the first clue. It was a story about Socrates.

WEST: Socrates? But surely, he was an out-and-out humanist!

EAST (shaking his head): I beg to disagree with you. It is true that your humanists have claimed him as their exclusive kin, but Socrates was too profound and complex to be a mere humanist. You people read into him just what you want to, forgetting, as is very convenient, that he indulged in solitary raptures and was, in spite of his aggressive ways, one of the humblest of men the West has ever known. Nevertheless I agree that though there was

always this mystic in him who never died, his outward behaviour was that of a simple man of humour and logic whose chief concern was the discovery of a human solution to human problems on the human level. But let me tell you the story. (Smiling reminiscently) Once upon a time he met a Hindu Brahmin, a Sage, who had come to Greece to study Greek Art. Asked what he was dedicated to, Socrates replied: "Humanity and all that leads to the understanding of Man". The Sage gave him a cryptic smile and asked again: "But how can one understand Man without first understanding God?"

WEST (intrigued): And how did Socrates meet his question?

EAST: The story does not say. But the question set me thinking and the more I pondered the less I doubted the wisdom of the Hindu sage. However, it so happened that just at this juncture a friend of mine sent me a copy of the *Svetashwatara* Upanishad. As I read the Book, it was borne in upon me that the Hindu sage was wiser than the Greek philosopher. And the couplet which brought light into my darkness was:

Yadā charmavad ākāsham veshtayishyanti mānavāh
Tadā Devam avijnāya duhkasyānto bhavishyati.

Which means:

You'll put a term to human pain
Not knowing Him, the Lord of Bliss?
First fold the sky like a skin around
Yourself: you'll sooner succeed in this.

It came to me like a revelation. I gave up studying Western science, economics and sociology and harked back to our great Upanishads, the *Gita* and, lastly, the soul-stirring *Bhagavat* dominated by Krishna, the most wonderful Figure of Light that ever rainbowed across our abysmal world—an epiphany so intimate and yet so over-

awing! It was then that the solution dawned on me: that to understand human ways you must first gain a working clue to those of the Divine, the *Gita's* image: "*urdhwamulam adhahshākham*—the Tree of life has its roots in the Sky"—the picture stirred me to my depths. Then, as I read the *Bhagavat*, I turned full circle—travelling from the East to the West, to return, at long last, to my homeland, finally to accept her hoary message: we must turn first to those who knew and know and by worshipping them inherit their consciousness and vision, or, more practically, we must first learn to reverence the sadhus who are sent to us as intermediaries, not to "justify God's ways to Men"—which is repugnant to our seers who hold that God's ways have to be accepted *before* justification—but to teach us to venerate the holy. For, as Prahlad justly says in the *Bhagavat:* one cannot learn to venerate the Lord without first venerating the dust that clings to the feet of His great devotees.[3] Then I met my Guru who finally made me throw everything over. Little by little I learnt to venerate him and through my veneration saw what I had never seen before—namely, why the sadhus of India (who had realised Him as the Friend of all creatures—*Suhridam sarvabutanam*) had come to be cherished by us as our greatest friends and monitors.

WEST (expectantly, after a brief pause): May I know—why?

EAST (holding his eyes): Because it was *they* who constituted the vanguard of our civilisation; because they alone illustrated fully, in their radiant lives, what had been commended in our immemorial scriptures, namely, that man must turn, first and last, to *His* Light, learn to perceive *His* Will in that Light and then walk in life by that Light, doing His Will and spreading His Message on earth. Thus it was that I started to seek Truth with the one Light they

[3] *The Bhagavat*, VII, 5, 32.

all revealed—which my Guru showed once again to me—until I came finally to realise that man could not possibly grow to his full stature until he learnt to live in the Spirit and found himself in Him and all else, for only then could he truly serve his kin—each in his humble way, but in the most effective way, that is, in the way *He* would have us serve others. In other words, to live as He would have us live, at one with Him and seeing nothing but Him anywhere, since when the ego was dissolved how could there be any other seeing than that of oneness? This I found to be the best way as shall the others, too, when—gradually, with the evolution of consciousness, we shall have transcended our egoistic limitations. (His eyes glisten in the light of the setting sun, as he continues in a moved voice) On that day the Promised Era of *Ramrajya*—the empire of the Lord—shall be inaugurated, and men shall realise the great debt they owed to those few who, in every age, have sung of the One and, staking their all for the One, have attained to the One to be able to win for mortals their divine heritage. Yes, our *Rig-Veda* has hymned their glory rightly: "मर्तासः सन्तो अमृतत्वमानशुः:—mortals, they won to immortality." (He closes his eyes .... two tears slowly trickle down his cheeks as he sings abstractedly in a low voice):

Esha devo Vishwakarmā Mahātmā
Sadā janānām hridaye sannivishtah:
Hridā manishā manasābhiklipto
Ya etad vidur amritāste bhavanti.[4]

[4]The ever-immanent in the hearts of all,
The Divine sustaining all everlastingly,
Reveals Himself to the souls, havened in Light:
Who know this One—win Immortality.
Svetashwatara Upanishad...IV.17.

CHAPTER XI

CONTAGION OF THE HOLY

THE pragmatic-rational intellect of today, especially in the West, claims to have succeeded in isolating the grain from the chaff, in distinguishing between Godlovers and Godliness, seers and vision. To put it more trenchantly, since the deification of Science, the discerning mind of the modern appraiser has come to regard personalities as less important than the principles they personify. Principles, we are told, lead to liberation, whereas personal veneration leads to bondage. In India the outlook is very different. We Indians are convinced of the supreme efficacy of an inner contact with a saint or a seer, or even with a truly spiritual man who has made some headway towards the Supreme Light. We still hold with the *Gita,* that

"Whatever the sage initiates the rest adopt
And follow the trail of truth-light he has blazed." (3.21)

The *Bhagavat* goes even further and says again and again that the sages uphold the spiritual truths with their lives and by the force of their essential holiness make them living.

The modern thinker, preferring the doctrine to what he somewhat disparagingly calls the "doctrinaire", looks askance at the evolved heart's instinctive reverence for the holy. He protests that Truth is more important than the prophet, Law than the legislator. He holds, not perhaps without some justification, that the converse outlook tends to degenerate into a blind cult of hero-worship which vitiates values and ends finally in placing the Godlover above Godlove. To this the traditionalist of the Orient will say—and with deeper justification—that Godlove remains a dead word till the dynamic personality of a Godlover endows it with life.

Having been bred in this great and heart-warming tradition, attested by the wisest of the land, I shall make bold to deal reminiscently with a few of the Godlovers with whom I have had the supreme good fortune to come into contact during my humble quest for Truth. And as these have helped me every time in my own orientation, I shall persist in hoping that my homage, too, may help a few kindred souls in theirs. I know that I shall be dubbed by some a hero-worshipper, but the prospect leaves me unperturbed. For I believe that one of the best and most effective ways of serving Truth is to express fearlessly what one has experienced and believed to be true and valid, the more so, as every point of view honestly held by a sincere truth-seeker must contain some measure of truth, some aspect of the manifestation of the One-in-Many. So I shall keep on hoping that, though a good many among the moderns may misunderstand, a few will be able to see what has made India what she still is: a hallowed haunt of noble and spiritual personalities, holy scions of a living heritage—one of whom proclaimed so beautifully:

"A true Yogi shoots out, like arrows over the world, good thoughts bearing grace and spiritual power which, upon striking those who are receptive, implant his blessings in the hearts of men."[1]

* * * *

I will try to be as simple in my narrative as I can, beginning autobiographically as all such reminiscences are bound to be. I would only ask the gentle reader to believe one thing: that I have chosen the direct autobiographical style not because I wish to bring myself to the fore, but because I am persuaded that in this way I shall be more successful

[1] *Tibet's Great Yogi, Milerappa,* by W. Y. Evans Wentz (Oxford University Press)

in what I want to emphasise, namely, the lasting inspiration that a holy personality may be to a sincere aspirant for holiness.

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I was only a boy of thirteen when the great biography of Sri Ramakrishna Paramahamsa (translated into English under the title of *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* by Swami Nikhilananda) fell into my hands and startled me by its breath-taking message that God was no remote shadowy sphinx hidden behind the curtain of the sky, but a vivid super-conscient Being of compassion who answered our human prayers and crystallized into a human form to hold parley with us humans, face to face! I can well remember how my first reaction was to reject the thesis out of hand and to put it down to fantasy or hallucination. But as I read on Sri Ramakrishna's talks with his chronicler, whose pen-name was Sri Ma, (his full name was Sri Mahendra Gupta) my scepticism gradually gave place to my growing desire that the impossible might be made possible through the agency of some divine miracle.

At this time I went to Shantipur, a village not far from Calcutta, to pay a flying visit to my uncle, Dr. Nikunja Mohan Lahiri, who—I was told—had been living for some years in direct communion with God. I doubted and yet ached to believe. So I went to "see for myself"—as I put it in my boyish presumption. The prospect of meeting this saintly uncle of mine exercised my juvenile imagination the more because I had heard from my father all about his aggressive this-worldly ways before his sudden conversion to spiritual life. My father and many another used to regret that such a brilliant medico should have all but given up seeing patients because these interfered with his "other-worldly obsession" as they called it. I longed to get to the bottom of the mystery.

What I saw was this. My uncle rose from his bed very early and after a few hours of meditation (or *pujah*—worship) went out on his rounds and saw a few patients. He came back about midday and gave what he had earned to his eldest daughter-in-law, who kept house for him, and from then on he belonged to none but his one Lord Krishna. He had to earn his living in order to support those who were dependent on him, but as what he earned in his morning round just sufficed, he saw no one after midday except some friends who were also devotees of the Lord. With these he talked only about the lore of the spirit, read the sacred books and then went on hearing *kirtans* (devotional songs) for hours. He took no exercise, had no desire for money or fame, hankered for no diversion and indulged in no small talk, not to mention gossip. His *grande passion* was the Lord and he aspired only to concentrate on the Eternal (*nitya*) as against the ephemeral (*anitya*). He admitted no intimacies that were worldly, had no interest in family relationships, went to no social parties—in a word, he had come to be looked upon by all his neighbours and friends as a man who had "gone crazy" about the Divine. Some, who were a little more lenient, said with bated breath: "Nikunja is gripped irretrievably by the Lord!" But all agreed that he was a kindly soul, albeit without attachments of any kind, a conscientious physician during the few hours he did attend to his patients, and as brilliant in his diagnosis, as competent in his prescriptions and as confidence-inspiring to the ailing as ever. For all that, they said that he was dead to the world as indeed he was, since the centre of gravity of his consciousness as well as daily life had shifted from the world and come to rest on an Entity that seemed to belong elsewhere. To give a random instance: when he met me he welcomed me cordially enough, but not as his nephew and the son of his famous brother-in-law, but as one who could sing devotional songs. I well remember his first question because it surprised me not a little. "I understand, my child, that you sing devotional songs

beautifully," he said, almost wistfully. "Won't you sing me something? Do you know that song Sri Ramakrishna loved: *shakali tomār ichchhā ichchhāmoyi Tārā tumi?*"

I nodded shyly and sang the song of which I give a few lines in my English translation:

All all's ordained by thee, O Mother!
  And naught transpires but at thy will.
Thou art the Doer and yet we, fools,
  Still vaunt: "'Tis we our fates fulfil!"
When thou but beckonest, cripples scale
  The heights and elephants sink in mire.
Some thou mak'st into mighty kings
  While others thou doomst to Hades' fire.

As I sang, tears coursed down his fair cheeks and he went into a *bhava-samadhi* (a half-trance of ecstasy). I was told by his sons, my cousins, that in this state he enjoyed deep communion with the One who sometimes came to him as the Divine Mother, Kali; sometimes as Krishna; sometimes as Shiva and in other forms as well.

It was my first experience of a Godlover whose entire being "lived and moved in God". I had heard and read of the saints' lives but so far had never seen one. His whole face radiated joy and a strange absorption, the like of which I had never seen before. My scepticism gave place to a veneration for this uncle of mine whom so many, I felt, had misunderstood, although I did not know how I had taken it for granted that I myself was a better judge than those who criticised him harshly. For in this case, I had no precedent to go by though I had seen quite a few of India's "celebrities", whose brilliant gifts I wholeheartedly admired. But surely this was an experience in a totally different category! For while those others coruscated in wit and repartee, composed lovely songs and turned out wonderful dramas, novels and essays—in a word, strutted before the footlights of wealth or fame—here was a man

who had no special gifts to flaunt and yet his face and eyes radiated a bliss and peace the like of which I had never yet seen on any living countenance! What was this beatitude, I asked myself, which had made him forget my beautiful aunt (whom he had passionately loved and mourned) and lifted him out of the abysmal pain of bereavement to this pinnacle of self-lost ecstasy? What I had read of the breath-taking lives of saints were *not* then mere fables fabricated by their adoring Boswells! Years later, when I came to yearn for the second sight which would enable me to *see* what this seer had seen and not merely *heard* about, I wrote a poem:

My heart is sated with all my ears have heard
    Of thy far miracle Grace:
'Tis time thou gavest me thy boon of eyes
    That leads to blessedness.

Yes, he left an indelible impression on my adolescent soul. For here I had *seen,* albeit at one remove, something that had stirred me to my very depths and convinced me that such a life could be *lived* in this drab world of ours, a life that throbbed with a consciousness that was as different from our normal consciousness as wings from feet, music from prattle. Prior to this great experience, my aspiration for the mystic life had been more or less inchoate and lack-lustre, because, do what I would, I could not bring myself to believe with all my heart that what the sacred books claimed as possible was feasible—or, rather, experientially verifiable.

* * * *

The second blow to my residual scepticism came a few months later—in the year 1910, if my memory serves me. It was dealt to me by another saint—the far-famed chronicler of Sri Ramakrishna, Mahendranath Gupta, who wrote, as I have already mentioned, under the pen-name of

Sri Ma, because he did not want to court the lime-light. Without telling anybody, he had kept a meticulous record of the talks of his Master in his voluminous diaries. The first volume of what he had registered had seen the light of day as early as 1897, after which four more volumes were issued—the last, posthumously, in 1932. Up to the year 1910 only two volumes had been published which I had devoured with avidity. I asked my cousin Nirmalendu Lahiri, my saintly uncle's son, about Sri Ma, for he used to visit the famous chronicler fairly often. I was told that the great saint, though a householder, lived like a hermit, moving in the world and yet not belonging in it, like a lotus flowering in the mire and yet defying it to contaminate its petals. That is all very well, I riposted, but how could one be sure that what he had recorded was authentic? To this my cousin replied, somewhat riled, that Sri Ma had been gifted with a prodigious memory. "If you want to verify it," he challenged, "come, I will take you to him and you will see for yourself that his diaries fill a whole shelf." My curiosity aroused, I complied with his invitation with alacrity and went.

I shall never forget my first impression. As I was ushered into a small room I was halted by the calm steady gaze of a fair man who was sitting cross-legged on a four-poster, surrounded by books. I averted my eyes, not a little embarrassed, when they were arrested by a shelf in one corner of the room upon which stood arrayed the epoch-making "diaries", beautifully bound in shining morocco.

I looked again in his direction and was greeted by a beautiful smile. I was instantly disarmed by his serene face—radiant, tender and shy, with starry eyes and a flowing white beard. He did, indeed, look like a saint and had the voice of one. He asked me kindly who I was. I told him, somewhat proudly, my father's name.

"Oh, you are D. L. Roy's son?" he exclaimed in delight. "Blessed, blessed boy, to own such a father! Come, come,

sit down near me—come closer." And he stroked my face gently with his palm as I made him my obeisance. He appraised me with an affectionate scrutiny.

"Now tell me, my son," he said, patting me on my shoulder, "what has prompted you to visit me?"

I felt shy and blushed. "I have come, sir," I faltered out, "t—to hear from your lips about *Thakur* (Sri Ramakrishna) and to have a l—look at your diary if I may."

At these words his fair face flushed instantly. I was bewildered. He turned round towards the door and shouted: "Prabhash! O Prabhash! Just come .... come ... run! ... Look, this little boy has come to me to hear about *Thakur* ... a little boy, fancy that!" Then turning to me as suddenly: "Look, look, my son, how my hair has stood on end!"

I did not know what to think, for, as I looked at him in amazement, I saw that he was actually quivering from head to foot in sheer ecstasy! I was moved and said to myself: "What *Gurubhakti* (devotion to the Guru)!" And I realised as never before how intensely he must have loved his Master to have been so profoundly moved by a mere stripling just because he had come to him to hear about the great Alchemist who had changed his whole life and transformed him from an intellectual into a devotee! For although outwardly he still looked like a householder, he was, intrinsically, an anchorite, cloistered in a small room, consorting chiefly with his Master's disciples and spiritual seekers—in a word, living just to serve his Master in the way he had enjoined.

Of course all this I did not realise immediately: it was all borne in on me in the course of time as I went on evolving myself, for I could not possibly have had any adequate conception just then of what *bhakti* (devotion and adoration) signified, far less how it could transfigure a worldly man and a householder into a saintly and dedicated soul.

I came into contact with him a few times after that and each time I was fascinated by his incredible love for his Master. He discouraged all talk unless it was about Sri Ramakrishna and loved to describe, sometimes with his eyes glistening, how adorable he was in his grace and humour, laughter and tears, songs and dances and, above all, in his child-like simplicity and the world-oblivious God-intoxication which presided over everything he did.

To hear straight from his lips how his Master had comported himself, how he had talked and laughed and now and then suddenly broken out into song, dripping the purifying light of ecstatic adoration, to drink in the soft cadences of his voice as he gave a graphic description of Sri Ramakrishna's modes and idiosyncrasies, his simple manner of asking questions, his naive way of wondering at things and yet interpreting everything he experienced as the One whom he saw revealed everywhere and, to crown all, how he could love and suffer selflessly for those who could give him nothing at all by way of compensation: all this was an education for me in the (alas!) discredited lore of the spirit. As I listened to him, my as yet unsophisticated juvenile heart heaved with delight and wonderment and I took a silent vow to tread the path Sri Ma and my saintly uncle had trod—the path of *bhakti*—and to aspire for the Eternal City of Brindaban where Divine Love alone held sway.

But then as I grew and came to know the seekers of the West a little better (or shall we say, the modern intellectuals of the world at large) I had to admit that their way of seeking was not ours. For they, with all their largeness of heart and genuine toleration, cannot easily take to the worship of a Guru or a saintly personality. But we, Indians, take to such worship as spontaneously as swans to water. Of course things are not today what they once were and we also are being powerfully swayed by the Western outlook on things. So perhaps we, too, are not now nearly

as enthusiastic about the worship of personalities as we once were. Still, I venture to aver that the worship of saints, sages and Gurus is easier for us even today than it is for the Westerner.

As we, today, are much influenced by the West, we cannot but feel a little disappointed to think that what we call *bhakti* is not likely to be truly appreciated in the West. So I too felt disappointed, even pained, at the start. But as I pondered I came to see more and more clearly why the Westerner hesitates to undersign our veneration for personalities. He seldom meets a saint, far less an authentic Guru, and so cannot possibly know from first-hand experience what is given to a devotee like Sri Ma or Brahmananda to experience.

But while one need not criticise the Western appraiser too superiorly for his (almost) congenital limitation, one cannot help but recognise a limitation for what it is, the more so as it does stem from a mentality which, even when it is moved by the authentic *bhakti,* feels impelled to hold back, unwilling to surrender to its radiant floodtides. Such being the case, one can hardly expect the average Westerner, at the present stage of his evolution, to grasp the full import of what Krishna proclaimed everlastingly in the *Gita* (11.54):

> Only the one-pointed Love can know and see
> And dive deep into the essence of my Being.

Of course he may contend—and not without some justification—that a Love which is not piloted by knowledge (and reason too, he will add) often leads us astray. This may, indeed, be true of love on the lower levels, but it cannot apply to Love which has attained the higher plateaus of purity where *Bhakti* (Love) is indistinguishable from *Jnana* (Knowledge), because there the seeming differences

between *Bhakti* and *Jnana* are resolved into a single consciousness and Bliss derived from the Union. At the same time it can hardly be denied that the two paths remain different till the penultimate stage of the soul's Mergence. In this fact of experience must be sought the reason why those who fare on one path tend so often to look down on those others whose *swadharma* impels them to prefer a different approach and so accentuate misunderstandings and disharmony. This may be regretted but cannot be denied. So we have to admit that the West is temperamentally inclined to extol the path of Knowledge approved by the intellect, whereas India prefers, by and large, the path of Love Divine sponsored by the heart. That is why India has all along acclaimed the purifying influence of the saints and seers who, in their turn, have found her soil more sympathetic than that of the West. No wonder the West cannot fully appraise the boons conferred on spiritual aspirants by the mystics, while India, never having been without them, has grown to cherish them for what they are and symbolize in the realm of the Spirit. And this again is, in the last analysis, one of the basic reasons why *Guruvad*—as we, Indians, understand it—seems somewhat suspect in the eyes of the Western rationalist. The utmost they can concede is that the Guru should be a respected guide and helpful adviser, whereas we, in India, not only approve of the profound veneration for the personality of the Guru as exemplified by such eminent disciples as Vivekananda, Sri Ma and Brahmananda, but feel so moved by it that we set them before us as luminous exemplars to be emulated. And so, when such faithful devotees tell us in vibrant accents that the Guru is a symbol and must be worshipped as a Representative of the Divine (*Ishta*), our hearts go out to them because they voice what, inarticulate in us, cries for expression, to wit, the certitude that loving the Guru as a deputy of the Divine is the first step

toward loving the Divine. And our gratitude knows no bounds as we sing, echoing the Sanskrit dictum:

Ajnāna-timirāndhasya jnānānjana-shalākayā
Chakshurunmilitam yena tasmai Shri Gurave namah.

Who opens with his wand of Knowledge my eyes which
groped
In the dark of ignorance—to him, my Guru, I bow.

I say all this, not to vent eloquence, but to stress the vivid experience which came to me through the agency of this supreme disciple Sri Ma, namely, that if the tree is to be judged by its fruit, our whole-hearted acceptance of *Guruvad* is nothing to be ashamed of since it can breed, even today, a personality of such outstanding humility as Sri Ma, not to mention the great prophet of fire who came as Vivekananda. A great Guru confers on each of his disciples a fulfilment which is in consonance with his *swabhava*—native temperament. I had read with a beating heart about the heroic soul of flame which was Vivekananda but I had not had, till I met Sri Ma, any clear conception of the other type of greatness: the greatness of self-effacing humility and lowliness, like the proverbial "blade of grass" which yet cannot be uprooted by the storm that bears down proud trees. But the occidental seeker of today, has not had the good fortune, alas, to meet such outstanding devotees, as steadfast in their faith as fascinating in their blossoming. So what resort has he except reserve and vigilance and a non-committal suspension of judgment? Furthermore, not having experienced such love as Sri Ma's, how can he realise that his wary approach is essentially incompatible with that unbargaining love for the Divine in the Guru, the love that only aspires to surrender with utter abandon all he has and is at the feet of his Master, to arrive at self-annihilation through the all-consuming power of Love's conflagration? I lay no claim to having realised all this at one bound: it was borne in upon me rather slowly and laboriously as I went on contacting various saints and

sages in my groping, stumbling quest after Krishna. But though the emergence of this realisation was tardy, it was none the less unmistakable. I found that I had gained through my contacts with the holy what I could not have gained otherwise in that they fortified my faith and stimulated my aspiration more through the impact of their adoration than through their knowledge of the deeper verities. And this was so because they invariably appealed more to my heart than to my reason. In other words, their love was more contagious than their knowledge, because I came to love them more easily than I could grow to know them. And this must happen to all whose destiny is to tread the perilous path of Love (*Bhakti*) than the comparatively safer path of Knowledge (*Jnana*). To pilgrims of this category—and they are bred in much greater abundance in India than in the West—the personal values are certainly more helpful than the impersonal. So to come back to the personal.

* * * *

In 1913, just as I had matriculated, my father died leaving me a large income. My maternal grandfather, who was a millionaire, took me under his wing when I had just turned sixteen. I graduated in 1918 and decided to go to England for higher studies. I had by this time acquired a fair mastery of the intricate technique of our Classical music which I came to love passionately, to the dismay of my sedate and Victorian guardian who held that music was disturbing if not dangerous. But I ignored him and went on singing everywhere till I became almost famous, while still in my teens. Because of this, many a father with a nubile daughter began besieging my grandparents who pressed me to get married before sailing for Europe. Meanwhile I had taken a secret vow to stay a celibate all my life though very few even among my friends knew of it. One of my confidants was Shri Subhash Chandra Bose, with whom I shared my spiritual aspiration, the more, as

he had taken a similar vow though from a different urge. He aspired to be a patriot while I was anxious to become a devotee of the type of Sri Ma. But my grandfather who knew nothing of it all, pressed me to marry a rich heiress. What he dreaded, as a conservative Hindu, was lest I should fall for a European girl. As however, I persisted in negativing every proposal that arrived, he asked me to accompany him on a visit he had decided to pay to Swami Brahmananda in order to get the protection of his blessing. Besides, as he had treated Sri Ramakrishna, as a physician, when he was suffering from cancer, he knew something of the power of Yogis. He knew personally a good many of the direct disciples of the great Messiah and notably Swami Brahmananda, whom he venerated as a great saint.

I was overjoyed as I had read up all that there was to be read about Swami Brahmananda (or Rakhal Maharaj as he was called by his intimates and devotees) whom Sri Ramakrishna used to style his "*manasa putra*"—that is, spiritual son. I knew that as a disciple he had been tenderly loved by the great Master who would, sometimes, even feed him with his own hands, like a mother. But my grandfather, never having been my confidant, did not know that since my boyhood I had been an ardent admirer of the great disciple of the great Godlover.

But my joy gave place to a palpitation of awe as we entered the house of the late Balaram Bose (another direct disciple of Sri Ramakrishna) where Swami Brahmananda was staying at the time. As we mounted the steps, the fragrant scent of incense filled me with an exaltation which I attributed to the presence of one of the greatest Yogis of modern India, a Yogi whom Sri Ramakrishna used to describe by the term *nityasiddha* (born emancipated). I recalled his apt simile of the legendary Eagle, which laid its egg in the sky. Out of this egg the young bird is hatched while still falling down from on high, and, conscious from birth that the blue is its home, soars back to it before it can

crash down on to the earth. I recalled, thrilled, how Sri Ma had described the deep human-divine intimacy which existed between his mighty Master and this ideal disciple. I recalled the former's prophecy: "Rakhal will never degenerate into a mere worldling: he is a born Yogi." He was at the time the head of the Ramakrishna Mission and was worshipped by thousands of devotees as a shining example of how a Yogi should comport himself in life, dominating it like a king, yet not bound by his kingdom. Such was the man I was now going to meet! "Blessed, blessed am I," sang my young blood. It was with difficulty that I could inhibit my tears.

As we entered the living-room of Swami Brahmananda, which was on the first floor, the great Yogi, in ochre-coloured robe, turned and greeted us with a simple smile.

"O Pratap Babu!" he acclaimed. "This is, indeed, delightful!"

The two old friends talked for a while in great joy, after which I was brought forward and presented. I was a-quiver with ecstasy. But then, alas, began my trial, for my grandfather at once began to complain of me and went on volubly for some few minutes. I will recount it briefly. The scene is graven on my memory!

After having given Swamiji all the enlightenment he needed about my character and antecedents, my grandfather may have felt that he had overdone it in his zeal.

"He is not a bad boy though," he extenuated. "And I will say this for him, that he is rather good in his studies—has passed this year with first class honours in mathematics But I *am* worried, Swamiji. You see, his father has left him a fairly large fortune. And then he is already a major, so there is no holding him. Besides, he is, as you can see for yourself, a handsome boy. But the trouble is, Swamiji, he is too downright by nature ... and temperamental ... and impulsive ... and modern—that is the worst of it—modern. So he refuses to marry ... God knows why ...

though several beautiful brides are in the offing—one of whom with a considerable dowry into the bargain. But alas," he shook his head dolefully, "he is obstinate as a mule and simply refuses to marry!"

An amused smile edged his interlocutor's lips.

"Indeed!" he said. Then he looked appraisingly at me for a space.

I felt the hot blood beginning to mount to my temples when he turned towards my crestfallen guardian.

"I quite understand, Pratap Babu," he said. "But what is it that you would have *me* to do about it? Surely you don't expect me to coax him into marrying—I being what I happen to be? But then," he added, mollifyingly, "why not leave it to him?"

"I would, willingly, Swamiji," explained the other. "Only the trouble is—he insists on proceeding at once to England. And I am—well, afraid for him, don't you see! He is a rather impetuous fellow and has plenty of money, and you know—perhaps you don't but *I* know—how quickly things come to a head there: He will march straight into the snare and will come back with an English minx —all painted and rouged! And that will be the end of everything —sheer ruin, I predict. So I told him: 'Since you are so pig-headed, at least come with me to a great saint: let us at least have his blessings by way of protection and so make the best of a bad bargain.' And, oh yes, I forgot to tell you," he added ruefully, "he happens to be a musician —simply sings and sings away—and you know how dangerous that is—when young girls are about—"

But he was cut short by Swamiji who addressed me eagerly.

"You sing, my boy? Why, that is very nice! Won't you sing something to us? A song about the Mother, I mean. Do you know any?"

I was overjoyed and complied readily. I chose a song, a famous *Kali-kirtan,* of the great devotee Kamalakanta—a song Sri Ramakrishna used to love, which I had set to music in the Raga Bhairavi. I give below the translation:

My soul's a honey-bee of love
The Mother's lotus feet invite:
And intoxicate, I fly to lose
My world and all in Her delight!

Earth's lesser loves have lost their savour:
Pledged am I to Her alone
And, thrilling in Her marvel Grace,
All other graces will disown

The twin blooms are dark and dark's my soul:
The pilgrim has attained the Goal!

Lo, barriers are overpassed,
Desire's snares have alien grown:
For, basking in Her marvel Grace,
All other graces I disown.

Kamalakanta's dream's fulfilled
At last—when She to him's revealed!

Beyond Time's pleasures and pains he harks
To Her blissful Timeless monotone:
So, thrilling in Her marvel Grace
All other Graces he will disown.

As I sang, his face became transfigured, almost self-luminous. Then he lost consciousness altogether and passed into a *samadhi.* I went on singing, my eyes fastened on his trance-still face, till I could see no more, through my unshed tears. When I paused at the end of my song, peace had descended into me—a deep peace which seemed to fill the interstices of my being. I felt, with a vividness I do not know how to describe, that he had blest me while I was singing.

My grandfather, too, was moved, for once. Perhaps he had felt, for the first time in his life, that music might, also, on occasion, avert danger instead of inviting it. Anyhow the expression on his face had changed and he looked approvingly at me as my eyes met his. And all the time the great Yogi sat, a statuesque figure, hardly breathing, a beatific smile on his face. Holiness was there and purity and, for me, romance! A stray line I had read somewhere recurred to me: "Eternity in an hour!" And it gave me not a mere feeling, far less a sentimental emotion, but a strange experience as of a glimpse—just a glimpse—but of what I could not define. Only one thing I knew, though I can neither prove it, nor wish to, namely, that I had received from him something which had purified me in an unaccountable way, and that it was something that belonged to me though it seemed to flow into me from him. But much as I would like to paint it more graphically, I will say no more because such an experience can never be convincing to one who has never felt the ecstasy of a saint's blessing.

We waited in silence till he came back to normal consciousness. Then he looked intently at me without speaking a word. I lowered my eyes, soothed and, withal, slightly embarrassed under his steadfast scrutiny. Then suddenly he turned towards my grandfather and said with a beautiful smile: "Pratap Babu! have no misgivings: he will come to no harm abroad."

My grandfather stared at him uncomprehendingly. Swamiji smiled again. "Do you know what I saw while he was singing? I saw an aura of protection around him ... *Thakur's* (Sri Ramakrishna's) aura, which is an armour, I tell you, and I know what I am speaking about. So let him go where he will—he will come back unscathed. He may, indeed, stumble sometimes—but I tell you he will not fall." Then turning his face towards me: "Come my boy—come nearer."

I could hold myself in no more and rested my brow on his feet as tears of joy and gratitude found an outlet at last.

He stroked my head and neck gently; the touch of his palm soothed my entire being as a cool current of deep peace coursed down my body from the crown of my head till it touched my navel... When I lifted my eyes to his he was still gazing at me tenderly.

"Won't you—won't you give me some—some advice?" I faltered out, wistfully.

He held my eyes for a few seconds; a gentle smile trembled on his lips.

"Only one thing," he said, his voice hardly above a whisper. "Remember—always."

"Remember?"

He nodded. "Yes, that is what *Thakur* used to tell us so often: *smaran manan*—to remember constantly—that is the essence of Yoga. And—remember his Grace—*Thakur's*—and keep reminding yourself. Say: 'I have received His Grace: I must be worthy of it.' And then—all will be well."

These were the only words of advice he gave me and they were etched for ever on the tablet of my heart.

* * * *

I sailed for England in June 1919, and, after having toured the continent, returned home in November 1922, recalled by a cable from my eldest uncle saying that my grandfather had been taken seriously ill. When I was back in Calcutta his loving face was there no more to greet me and so I could not tell him—as, somehow, I wanted to—about how the memorable *mantra* of the great Yogi had stood me in good stead through everything. As this is not

an autobiography, I cannot tell the story here. I have been constrained to tell as much of my life as will serve to bring out the saintliness of the saints who are my theme. Suffice it to say that his radiant face had helped me in Europe on more than one occasion, when I was weighed and I know—though this I cannot prove—that if I was not found wanting it was not because of my own will-power, but because of the Divine Grace that reminded me through his voice: "I have received Grace and I will be—must be—worthy of it."

My next encounter, in 1924, was with Sri Aurobindo himself, who was to accept me as his disciple four years later. I will not describe the interview, as I have already written about it fairly exhaustively in my two books: *Among the Great* and *Sri Aurobindo Came to Me*. I will, however, add a few words about him at the end of this chapter.

* * * *

I first heard of Sri Ramana Maharishi while I was a member of the Yoga-ashram of Sri Aurobindo. I asked him and he wrote back that the Maharishi (the word means a great sage) was a Yogi of remarkable strength and attainments and that his *tapasya* had won "glory for India". On another occasion he characterised him as "a Hercules among the Yogis." So I longed to pay a visit to the Ramana Ashram, situated at the foot of the hallowed Arunachala Hill. But I was told by some of the disciples of our Ashram that we should not come into contact with the Maharishi as the latter's ascetic Yoga was in ill accord with our Supramental Yoga, which could tolerate no outside influence of the traditional kind. I could not understand this strange prejudice, as I had been bred in the great Indian tradition which strongly advocates *satsanga*, contact with genuine sadhus. So, after due deliberation, I decided to visit

the Maharishi and win, if I could, some new inspiration from his holy presence.

But those who have lived long in an Ashram know, to their bitter cost, how difficult it is to take a line disapproved by most of the members of the institution. So it was far from easy for me to go to pay my homage to the Maharishi. It happened, however, that I was struggling at the time with a spiritual gloom which was a great deal harder to bear than the disapproval of my colleagues. So I ignored the latter.

Nevertheless, when I arrived at the small house where the Maharishi lived, I felt a deep malaise. How could I hope to get peace and inspiration from him if I failed to get it at the feet of my own Guru, who was surely no less great? Thus I argued, blaming myself for my imprudence, but it was now too late to return. Besides, the rebel in me spurred me on: why should I attach any importance to the opinions of my colleagues—why must I regret when I have done nothing wrong? I felt sincerely that I had done well in coming to seek inspiration from the great Yogi who was venerated by spiritual aspirants of every category. At the same time, I wondered whether this was the proper frame of mind in which to seek peace or light from a mighty Illuminate!

In spite of all this, the blessed miracle did happen, so that even in my then utterly unreceptive state of mind, the very first contact with the great Sage of Arunachala brought me an unforgettable peace and bliss. But let me not go ahead of my story.

I entered the living-room of the great Sage in the afternoon. It was just a bare hall in which I found him reclining on a four-poster. A handful of devotees were sitting on the floor. Some were meditating while others were gazing wistfully at the Sage who sat stone-still staring in front at nothing at all—as was his wont. He never spoke

unless somebody first spoke to him or asked a question. For fifty years he had been living on this hill and had felt no call to leave it. In the earlier stage of his *sadhana* he had lived in a cave, for nearly a decade, vowed to complete silence. In the Ashram, which had subsequently been built for him by a few of his devotees, he had now been living a singular life for the last forty years: blessing all but belonging to none, interested in everything but attached to nothing, answering questions but hardly ever asking any. He gave one the impression of a Shiva, the great God of compassion, who was there to give but not to ask any favours of anybody, living a blissful, free and open life, with no walls of the ego to cabin the summit vision. I had, indeed, read what Paul Brunton had written about him and had heard a lot about his lovable ways from a dear friend of mine, Duraswami, who had known him for years. Some other devotees had told me that he had been living ever since his abandonment of the worldly life in a state of *sahaj samadhi*, that is superconscious in the ordinary, wakeful consciousness. But what I saw with my own eyes impressed me even more though I find it far from easy to portary what I saw or rather experienced. Here was a man who lived like a god, supremely indifferent to all that we, worldlings, clamoured for without cease. Dressed in a bare *koupin* (even scantier than a loin-cloth) he yet sat ensconced in a grandeur of plenary peace and egoless bliss which we could but speculate upon—never fathom, giving us a glimpse of another "mode of living" we could at best marvel at but never appraise! Kings had come to him with all sorts of rich offerings, but in vain: he had blessed them, but never accepted any gifts. He said one day to a disciple with an ironic smile as he pointed at a golden temple which his devotees were building to honour him: "Just fancy, they insist on erecting this for me when all I need is the shade of a tree under which to sit!"

The modern man may criticise him for his lack of initiative and argue that humanity has little use for one who lives thus aloof and isolated. But was he isolated—he who radiated peace which hundreds of visitors have experienced by just sitting near him in silence? Did not the lineaments of his serene face, his beautiful smile, his tranquil glance, convey to all a message of liberation—*jivanmukti?* Did he not blossom like a flower stemming from the earth, yet alien to all that was earthly? Did not his frail frame disengage a strength that was not human, his life attest to an invisible anchorage which made him utterly secure and free from the last vestige of fear? Yes, as he told me later, the Maharishi put a premium on two things: inaccessibility to fear and to flattery, however subtle. Once a snake passed over his body while he lay in his dark cave at night. His friend and attendant (a doctor, who related this to me) jumped up as it passed over his chest. "Why? What is the matter?" the Maharishi asked him.

"A snake!" he answered.

"I know," acquiesced the Sage. "It passed over my body previously."

"It did?" asked the Doctor. "And how did you feel?"

"Cool!" came the rejoinder.

Anent flattery he told me this story.

"A man may go very far," he said, "but not till he has travelled beyond the reach of all flattery can he be said to have arrived. Listen. There was once a rich man who wanted God. He gave up his family, home, comforts, everything and repaired to a forest where he practised untold austerities for years till he arrived at the Golden Gate. But alas, the portals did not open to his repeated knocking —he did not know why!

"One day an old friend of his came upon him in the forest while he was meditating. When he opened his eyes, the friend fell at his feet in an ecstasy of adoration. 'O blessed one! How great you are—how heroic your austerities and sacrifice! Accept my homage.' The holy man had, indeed, practised all the austerities and made all the sacrifices attributed to him. Nevertheless he was pleased when the other paid him homage. And that was why the Golden gate had not opened to his knocking."

I heard of many other traits of his supremely lovable personality, amongst which must be counted his sense of humour and love of laughter. He coveted nothing, but loved to joke freely with those who came to him. One day, while I was sitting near him and some visitors were putting questions to him, a Muslim friend of mine asked: "Tell me, Bhagavan, why is it that God does not answer my prayer even when I petition Him for nothing earthly? I only pray to Him to make me humble and pure and selfless so that I may serve Him as I ought. But He simply does not listen. Why doesn't He?"

"Probably because He is afraid that if He did you wouldn't pray any more," answered the Sage readily, with a merry twinkle in his eye.

And we all laughed in chorus.

Many is the time he was asked, even challenged, to prove what he had seen.

"Ah!" he would reply placidly. "I will answer that question if you answer mine: Who is it that is asking this question?"

"Who? Surely, I—so and so."

"I know. But *who* are you?"

"Me? ... I ... I ... I ..."

And the Maharishi would laugh. "So you see, you do not even know such a thing as your own identity, yet you presume to challenge others and their experiences. I would suggest you find out first *who* is this challenger and then the truths you challenge will be made manifest to you."

True to our great Indian tradition, the Maharishi did not relish answering merely intellectual questions, or the queries of the curious who were content with mere wordy answers to words. Again and again he used to stress that information was not knowledge and that all true knowledge stemmed from self-knowledge. So sometimes, when he was asked about the worlds beyond or the life hereafter he would simply evade the question. "Why put the cart before the horse?" he was wont to say. "Why this itch to know about the other worlds? Do you know even the crucial and basic things about *this* one? If not, why not wait till you do before you start delving into the *next?* Why do you want to know what happens after death? Do you know what is happening before your eyes? Why go to an astrologer to be told what you will be twenty years hence? Do you know—truly know—what you are today—this moment?" And so on.

Once the matters came to a head. A disciple of his was puzzling a good many of the members of the Ashram, for he was living in perfect bliss in a tiny room, sitting all day on a bare mat, hardly taking the trouble even to eat unless somebody brought him food. Speculation was rife: some thought that he had gone mad; others that he had gone far, while others again said with bated breath that he was living in that superconscious state which the *Gita* describes as the *"Brahmi sthiti"*. In the end a regular deputation waited upon the Sage who heard them with his usual patience. Then he gave the leader of the deputation a quizzical smile.

"You want to know his inner state, do you?" he asked pointedly.

The man fidgeted beneath his scrutiny. "Well...yes... I..."

"Wait," he interjected. "First tell me this: do you know your own state?"

The other was unnerved. "N—no," he faltered.

"Right," the Maharishi rejoined, in a pleased tone. "First find out your own state and then you will know his."

The whole Ashram enjoyed it—except the leader of course.

Exigencies of space forbid my writing about this outstanding Yogi and the deep influence his holy life has exercised upon hundreds of spiritual seekers all over the world, although he had done hardly anything of a spectacular kind to enlist the attention of the multitude. Those who wish to know more about him are referred to his published biographies and to the pamphlets about his Ashram which are available. A brief account of his call to Yoga is all that can be given here.

He was suddenly drawn to the holy temple of Shiva on Arunachala Hill in 1896, when he had just turned sixteen and with just five rupees in his pocket he left his home and parents and everything a man holds dear. He did not know the way to the temple but somehow arrived there with literally just what he wore, trusting entirely to the mercy of his heart's Lord, Shiva. He arrived at the temple and went straight to the Image of the Lord and, with tears coursing down his cheeks, said: "I have come at last, Lord! Accept me and devour me as a spider devours the fly." And at once he fell into a *samadhi* (trance).

Thereafter he lived on alms, eating but once a day and living most of the time in the bliss of *samadhi*. My dear friend Duraswami, who lived with him for years as one of

his intimates, told me this: Once he was expressing his admiration for the Sage's power of concentrating day and night on his *sadhana* when the other cut in, smiling: "*Sadhana?* Who did the *sadhana?* What did I know of *sadhana?* I simply came and sat down in the temple or elsewhere in Arunachala and then lost all count of time." To me he said the same thing in a slightly different way with his characteristic irony: "People call Him by different names, but He came to me with no name or introduction so I know not how to define Him. What happened was that my desires and ego left me—how and why I cannot tell—and that I lived thenceforward in the vast of timeless peace. Sometimes," he added with a smile, "I stayed with eyes closed and then, when I opened them, people said that I had come out of my blessed meditation. But I never knew the difference between no-meditation and meditation, blessed or otherwise. I simply lived, a tranquil witness to whatever happened around me, but was never called upon to interfere. I could never feel any urge to *do* anything—except to be—just *be*. I saw that all had always been done by Him and Him alone, though we, poor puppets of *maya*, feel ourselves self-important as the doers, authors and reformers of everything! It is the ineradicable ego, the *I-ness* in each of us, which is responsible for the perpetuation of this *maya* with all its attendant sufferings and disenchantments."

"What is then the remedy?" I asked.

"Just *be*," he answered. "Delve down into That which only *is*, for when you achieve this you find: 'That am I'—there is and can be nothing else but *That*. When you see this, all the trappings of *maya* and make-believe fall off, even as the worn-out slough of the snake. So all that you have to *do* is to get to this I, the real I behind your seeming I, for then you are rid for ever of the illusive *I-ness* and all is attained, since you stay thenceforward at one with That which is you, that's all."

"We have to do nothing then?"

"Why? You have done the greatest thing—the only thing that is worth doing and when you have done this, you may rest assured, all that has to be done will be done through you. The thing is," he added, "not to *worry* about doing: just *be* and you will have done all that is expected of you."

"That is all very well," I demurred. "But who is to show us how to do this—or rather *be*, as you put it. Is not a guide, a Guru, necessary? Or are you against *Guruvad?*"

"Why should I be against *Guruvad?*" he smiled. "Some people evidently need a Guru: let them follow him. I am against nothing except the ego, the *I-ness*, which is the root of all evil. Rend this and you land pat into the lap of the One Reality: *That*—the one solvent of all questionings."

"But why then don't you come out to preach this great message?" I asked. "For most people, you will agree, do not even know that there is this *I-ness* to be got rid of."

He gave me again that quizzical smile tinctured with his characteristic irony. Then he turned grave and asked:

"Have you heard of the saying of Vivekananda that if one but thinks a noble, selfless thought even in a cave, it sets up vibrations throughout the world and does what has to be done—what *can* be done?"

I nodded.

"Only—forgive me if I presume to ask whether it is being done—in a *tangible* way, I mean?"

He gave me a quizzical smile.

"Listen. A spiritual seeker used to attend, religiously, the lectures of a great pulpit orator and feel thrilled by all that he heard from day to day. But after some time he discovered, to his chagrin, that after all that he had heard he was just where he had been at the start—not an impulse

had changed. Then he happened upon a silent man, a Yogi, who said practically nothing; nevertheless he felt attracted by something in him he could not define and so went on being near him. After a time he discovered, to his great joy and surprise, that things which had worried him before affected him less and less, till he came to feel a deep peace and a sense of liberation he could not account for. And this grew with the passage of time till, at last, he became a different man altogether. Now tell me: which of the two would you name as the doer of something 'tangible' ?"

And this was true. After just being near him for a little while my gloom of months melted away like mist before sunrise. Nor could I myself "account for" why and how it happened. I only knew—and vividly—that it *had* happened. I shall never forget that night when, after having meditated at his feet, I felt a sudden release from what had been stifling me for weeks. It was such a delectable experience that I did not feel like going to bed. I pulled out a deck-chair and merely reclined in it under the stars, utterly relaxed. Everything around me seemed to drip peace and harmony: the breeze, the murmuring leaves, the hooting of an owl, a dog barking, the insects screeching . . . everything deepened my vivid sense of carefree plenitude. And I wrote a poem in the fulness of my heart of which I will give here a few lines:

You came in a pauper's garb and stayed to teach
The world what only a beggar could impart
And offered a kingdom we could never reach
By all our science, philosophy and art.
Some day a light shall dawn and then we'll know
What you came to give—a King, incognito!

He left his mortal body in May, 1950, after having suffered excruciating physical pain for two long years. One of his arms had become cancerous. The medical men did their poor best but nothing availed. He died, but with the self-same radiant smile on his lips. Once the operating

surgeon was surprised: the painful wound had to be prodded thoroughly. Declining an anaesthetic he stretched out his arm. The doctor was amazed: his face remained serene—not one groan issued from his lips! My friend Duraswami who was there could not bear the sight—the arm was bleeding so profusely—and went away shedding tears. He smiled and addressed a disciple who stood before him:

"Duraswami is crying because he thinks I am suffering agonies! When will he realise that I am not this body?"

Such was he. No wonder they called him Bhagavan (Godlike) Ramana Maharishi.

* * * *

The modern man often enough denounces the mystic as a selfish seeker of personal salvation. There may, indeed, be some sadhus who belong to this category. But the major mystics have never been indifferent to the suffering of others. Sri Ramana Maharishi proved this once again by the great life he lived after his attainment. He was always available, always ready to help with his words—more with his silent spiritual power. He was the soul of divine compassion—always giving, never asking anything for himself. No man who is selfish can attract a band of devoted seekers round him. The Maharishi drew to himself like a magnet some remarkable aspirants. This is not the place to talk about his remarkable devotees but I will end this tribute with a letter from one of his disciples—an Englishman of the name of Chadwick, who is still there—plodding perseveringly on, away from his home and family, treasuring the Guru in the heart. I was fascinated by his personality and wrote him a letter which I need not quote as it will be readily inferred from his reply, which is dated, October 1, 1946:

Dear Dilip,

It was kind of you to write ... I feel diffident in answering your questions as I fear I have made or may make myself appear of some spiritual attainment, a thing to which I have no pretension. I am just a humble seeker, with the same failings and the same difficulties as everybody else. That all paths are extremely difficult there can be no doubt, but how can it be otherwise? The ego which has taken such tremendous pains to establish itself as a seemingly independent and self-sufficient entity, will fight to the last ditch before it will admit defeat and relinquish its claims. But my motto has been persistence and I think by that victory is assured. The Guru of a friend of mine, who passed away some years ago and was undoubtedly a *Jnani*, used to tell him that if he desired Self-realisation sufficiently he could not even die till he had attained his goal. And in that is our hope.

You ask me how long I had to persevere in solitude before I attained peace ... Surely peace is a thing which grows and is not, for the majority, attained in a flash once and for all. (I do not speak of Self-realisation.) The moment I came into the presence of my Guru, eleven years ago, I found peace. My staying here was never premeditated, it was just something which had to be in spite of myself. It was my true home. However the pendulum swings, though in time the beats grow shorter and shorter until it comes to rest in the Self. To expect anything else is to expect the impossible.

The great thing seems to me is to follow one Guru and one path unwaveringly and the goal is assured. For after all the goal and the path are the same, the Chinese call both the WAY—TAO. But we become disheartened and impatient. These seem to be the two greatest obstacles to attainment. If we can only face up to these and go on in

spite of everything and everybody then there is absolutely no doubt as to the result. But how few of us can! May the Supreme Guru give us the necessary strength!

I seem to have been very prolix and to have preached. I ask your forgiveness.

Very cordially yours A. Chadwick

Glory to the Guru who can inspire such love and devotion in men of this calibre!

* * * *

They have all departed—all the saints that inspired me: Nikunjamohan, Saradamoni Devi, Sri Ma, Swami Brahmananda, Swami Saradananda, Aswini Kumar Dutta, Sri Ramana Maharishi and my Gurudev, Sri Aurobindo. Only three still survive: Roma Devi of Trichur, whom I met last year, in 1954; Sri Krishnaprem who lives in Almora, a living inspiration to hundreds, and Sri Ramdas, as he styles himself, meaning the servant of Lord Ram. Everybody else he addresses as Ram, whether man, woman or child, having seen Him in all: only in himself he sees the servant of Ram, presiding in the hearts of all.

He was born about seventy years ago in an orthodox Brahmin family. He had married and had been living the humdrum life of a householder, with a daughter just born, when his father gave him *diksha* (initiation) with a simple *mantra: Jai Ram, Sri Ram, jai jai Ram.* Just that. He has known no other worship, not to mention rituals or ceremonials. He repeated this one *mantra,* day and night, till Ram directed him to renounce the worldly life for that of a wandering mendicant in His Name. By Ram he means Krishna, he told me. (The Vaishnavas say that Rama and Krishna are the same.)

Perhaps of all the great saints that lived in India in our age, Ramdas has revealed most about himself and his inner *sadhana.* He has written a number of books in

simple English: *The Vision of God, In Quest of God, Songs of Ramdas,* etc. So I will not do more than write about how he impressed me and what he told me personally. Those who want to know more about him are recommended to his inspiring books, to drink straight at the fount, the more as he is too truthful and childlike a man to want to write to impress. He *is* a child of Ram and talks and lives like a child, loving children and playing with them as one of them. The first time I saw him he had a tiny baby in his arms whose mother had been deserted by her husband. (I myself had recommended this derelict woman to Sri Ramdas and she was accepted.) "I was born a baby," he once told me, laughing, "without a single tooth—and look!" —here he laughed in glee betraying his bare gums with not a tooth in his head—"Ram has so ordained that I simply had to revert to my babyhood again!" But to give his life-story in brief.

His father had given him the *mantra.* He went on repeating it pauselessly when lo, in a few days he reached an ecstasy which nothing could affect! Then Ram asked him to wander about India depending only on Him for his sustenance. Ramdas obeyed and tramped the length and breadth of India from Kashmir to Cape Comorin—literally a beggar in Ram's Name. All his experiences and trials during this period of homeless penury—his novitiate days as it were—have been chronicled by him with meticulous care. His books testify to the amazing simplicity, deep sincerity and almost flawless humility of this child and slave of Ram. I will only write here about what he said to me when I went to have his blessing a few years ago and stayed in his Ashram for a week.

My first question to him was: how was one to have the *darshan* (vision) of Krishna. He answered at once: "By becoming God-mad, Krishna-intoxicated. Love Him not *among* other things but *above* all things. Let Him be your one Goal—first and last—and everything else secondary.

Let me give you a homely simile: A man wants to catch a train; on the way he meets a dear friend; he excuses himself and says: 'I'm late—must run—see you later.' And he runs. You must run for Krishna in this way, saying: 'To Him, to Him first—everything else must wait till I find Him.' If your *vyakulata* (restless longing) to meet Him takes precedence over all other desires, you can be sure He is waiting for you there round the corner."

He used to visit me in my small room and sit down on the mat with me like a friend and talk and talk of Krishna's ways with a flushed face. "But Ram," he used to say, "do not want His *darshan* merely, as seeing Him is not enough. Ramdas told Him this when He came to him for the first time and danced all over the place, flute in hand. 'Nay, Lord,' pleaded Ramdas, 'this is all very well but it won't do. For you will vanish presently, leaving Ramdas a legacy of darkness.' It is not implied that seeing Him *in* Him is not great. Why, every touch of His is maddening. What is meant is that you must insist on seeing Him in all and all in Him. For then only will you be delivered from sorrow and the ego. And this Vision came to Ramdas first in a cave in Arunachala just after he had received the blessing of Bhagavan Ramana Maharishi. He it was who expedited Ramdas's final realisation by His Grace, the mighty Yogi, the King among men.

"And Grace, Ram's Grace!" he went on in a thick voice. "How can one describe the indescribable? It can only be experienced with one's whole being—never portrayed even with the loveliest of words. Meet Him face to face, for He *can* be so met if you love Him above everything. Love Him as you love nothing else and He *will* come to you—in any form you want. Do not waste time in discussing Him and His ways nor strive to understand with the mind His incomprehensible Play. That is *not* the way. Appeal to Him to teach you how to love Him and all will be revealed o you. Trust Him absolutely and He will take you in

hand and mould you to His will. He will draw you under the wings of His Love if you seek refuge in Him alone."

His eyes glistened as he went on: "Love....Love....we talk glibly of His Love. But what do we, poor fools, know of Love—*His* Love—just a drop of which makes one at once immortal and dead to everything else! Can the fly know the weight of a mountain? A mere pebble is more than it can bear. No, Ram! I tell you, words can never help you even to imagine the great mystery of His breath-taking Love. They can, at the most, put you on the way—at the starting point. But the whole way, the long steep ascent you have to traverse yourself, every inch of it, with all the power and tenacity of your own aspiration."

"What about the Guru, then?" I asked.

"The Guru can stimulate this but the flame of your aspiration has to be fanned sleeplessly by your own effort and vigilance. But the paradox is that however you may try you cannot make much headway if you tell yourself you will attain by your own effort. The effort leads to helplessness—the zero hour—when His help comes. But the effort has to be made to be able to realise the futility of effort unblest by His Grace. And this is a very valuable realisation in that it leads you into the heart of humility and submission without which one can never go far."

"That much, I think, I have come to realise, to my cost," I replied ruefully. "Only....I want to understand also if I may—a little, at least ..."

"Ramdas understands," he said with a lovely smile. "Only, Ram, in the domain of the Spirit one must first understand that one can understand very little with the mind—to start with." He suddenly chuckled in glee and added: "That reminds Ramdas of a rather funny incident. Listen." He laughed again and resumed:

"It happened a few years after Ramdas had turned a mendicant in Ram's Name. At the time he was living on the top of a hill in a small hut when, one evening, an intellectual friend of his sought him out. He had a great many questions seething in his mind to which, he said, he could find no satisfactory answers. Ramdas was scared stiff since he did not know how to deal with those who love to summon devotees to the dock deposing for the Divine. So he fobbed off his friend and postponed the discussion somehow. But as the ghost had been only warded off for the nonce, not laid, he had to appeal to his one Extricator, Ram. To his amazement, in the dead of night Ram Himself formulated some questions and answered them, point by point. And a strange feature of it was that it seemed as if the questions were being voiced by Ramdas himself as somebody's mouthpiece. Next morning he showed these—the questions and answers of which he had kept a record—to his intellectual friend who exclaimed: 'You take my breath away! For these were just the questions I came to put to you myself!"

And he showed me these in his book, *At the Feet of God*, from which I will give here a few excerpts:

Question: What is the result of self-surrender?

Answer: Everlasting bliss.

Question: How?

Answer: When the human will is given up for the Divine will, all responsibility of the instrument, the devotee, ceases and the consciousness of the individual ego is merged in the Divine Consciousness. Then all his actions, thoughts and words emanate from the Divine Source, leaving him free from all doubts, desire and bondage.

Question: How is it that you allow your child's mind to wander?

Answer: All, all is myself, O child! Wherever your mind wanders it wanders and rests in me ... You cannot reason why it is so, but it is the one great Truth. You cannot comprehend it but you can realise it.

Question: Why should Ramdas not comprehend it?

Answer: Because it is beyond the range of the intellect.

Question: Then explain why should there be an intellect at all and what are its functions.

Answer: The intellect exists to help you know that you do not *know* anything.

* * * *

The admonition is not something original except in regard to the context in which it originated—that is, at a certain stage of Ramdas's spiritual evolution. But when taken in conjunction with the fact that Ramdas himself voiced the questions which were answered by Ram, as also the singular circumstance that the visitor had gone all the way to Ramdas on the hill to get the light he badly needed, the miracle that happened seems even more significant than miraculous. But to resume the thread where I left off.

The first thing that strikes anybody who meets Ramdas is his utter simplicity and unpretentiousness. During my stay in his Ashram we discussed all sorts of questions and doubts which were afflicting me at the time and he helped me not a little by relating to me unreservedly how similar doubts had arisen in his mind and how they were solved by Ram Himself. He told me also how the Lord came to him like a friend with whom it was possible to joke and laugh. He told me about his great disciple Krishna Bai who had also attained Self-realisation through Ram's Grace. He told me about so many miracles he had seen, the sadhus he had profited by and, above all, Ram's deep solicitude about Ramdas. He regaled me with anecdotes, some were

amusing, but all were deep with spiritual significance. He spoke also of his disappointments, especially with regard to the Ashram he had come to sponsor. But I cannot recall a single instance when he asserted anything assertively or criticised others who were of a different persuasion or held views other than his own. He even praised most generously people who calumniated him, though I wondered often enough how anybody could have had the heart to throw mud at such a pure and humble soul whose every gesture exuded spontaneous good-will and friendliness, who refused to be offended and, to crown all, who hymned his great Care-taker even on those occasions when he might well have complained of having been let down. I feel tempted to give a good many instances of this simple trust that flowered so effortlessly in his reactions to life. But as, obviously, I cannot do that, only two of his experiences which he told me himself must suffice. I will narrate them briefly as he has recorded them fairly elaborately in his book, *In the Vision of God*.

Once he happened to stay with a ruling Prince in Central India as his honoured guest. The Prince and the Queen were his ardent admirers and gave him a great reception. The whole town paid homage to the saint who, though living at the time in the royal palace, received everybody—the rich as well as the poor—with the same spontaneous welcome. He was taken in procession through the capital and the poets and pundits came and composed songs and hymns in his honour.

After a few days he wanted to proceed on his journey; he wished to visit the *tirthas*. The Prince offered to reserve a saloon for him on the train. But as Ramdas insisted on a third-class compartment, they had to buy him an ordinary ticket.

It so happened that the train was crowded and the only ompartment where there was room had been occupied by

a number of Muslim roughs who did not want a Hindu sadhu among them. But the royal guard forced an entry and Ramdas got in unafraid, relying on his unfailing Protector, Ram. As the train moved on, more and yet more passengers entered the compartment, till Ramdas had to squeeze himself into a corner. But they grudged him even that much space and when a few more roughs bustled in Ramdas had at last to sit on the dusty floor. This amused the rowdies, who, taking him for a beggar and a coward, tittered at him and sometimes even kicked his shins in contempt. Tears fell from Ramdas's eyes and he muttered in ecstasy: "O Ram, your *lila* (play) is indeed inscrutable! Last night Ramdas was fawned upon by royalty and today he is kicked by all and sundry! How you love to play with your devotees!"

"On another occasion," he told me, "Ramdas was singing with some other sadhus in a wayside temple, praising the Grace of Ram who takes care of all, when a big cobra was seen creeping out from a corner. The sadhus leapt up in dismay, but Ramdas, who was in an ecstatic mood, did not budge. 'Why on earth do you leave your seats helter-skelter?' he asked. 'Don't you see that Ram Himself has put on a snake's disguise and come to accept our homage? Come, let us sing to Him.' But the others protested and shouted out to him: "Come away, Ramdas—don't be a fool ..." and so on. But Ramdas went on singing in rapture till the snake crept up to him and, when offered a sugar-candy, was mightily pleased and ate it out of his hand. And Ramdas said, in ecstatic tears: 'How unfathomable are your ways, Ram! Fancy your coming to your own slave to be fed by—a slave you have fed yourself all his life'!"

Such was the saint I had the good fortune to be blest by. I cannot write about him exhaustively. I will only add that when we do meet a saint, we are changed to some extent and grow, unawares, more receptive to a light that

is all around us and yet cannot enter our being because our disbelief shuts it out. The saint comes and helps us see how at home we have grown with darkness.

Not that one wilfully doubts or disbelieves. But then, being "sons of an intellectual age"—as Sri Aurobindo put it—we have grown somewhat opaque to the lights that hail from regions higher than that of the intellect. So we are anxious that our intellect should at least be partly satisfied before we can bring ourselves to concede that any supra-intellectual light can possibly mean business. And then what one has seen from a distance through clouds of rumour and hearsay can hardly afford us that solid basis upon which our feet can confidently rest. That is why, even when we have accepted the fundamental position of faith as against reason, we can only accept it somewhat tentatively, with the result that we stumble off and on and grievously at that, on the path of faith. At such times, the testimony of those who have arrived cannot but prove of inestimable value. For had this not been available, we might, indeed, still bring ourselves to accept faith on faith, only such a half-hearted conversion is ill-calculated to relieve the gloom, as every honest seeker must know, to his cost. At all events, that *is* one of the main reasons why true faith is more in evidence here, in India, than in the West—because here it is buttressed by the testimonies of the holy men who have, in a way, verified through direct experience the prophecies of faith. This is no mere theory: in India thousands flock to the saints and seers even to-day (*e.g.* in great congregations like the Kumbha Mela) because they do continuously win from them what they find they could never win otherwise or elsewhere—neither from unattested rumours, however widespread, nor spiritual dicta, however authoritative. There is an Indian adage which says:

> The Lord still speaks through voices strange: sometimes
> Through babbling babes, sometimes through raving saints.

To end now on a note dear to my heart: Sri Aurobindo.

It is not easy for me to write with restraint about him, not only because he was my Guru, but also because he was so great a man that it is difficult to sum him up in a few pages. But I will do my best.

Why does Sri Aurobindo impress us, moderns? It is a question I have discussed with many a friend in the Ashram (with his disciples as well as visitors) and I found that most people were impressed—even overawed—by his marvellous power of living a lonely life passed in a self-imposed solitude for an indefinite number of years. But many is the time I wrote to him that his genius for immuring himself within the four walls of a room had appeared to me as a limitation to be got rid of rather than a feat to be panegyrised. Most of my solemn friends were shocked, but not Sri Aurobindo, because he had an infinite power of understanding of entering into his appraiser's point of view. It was this great trait of his character that endeared him most to me—a trait that amounted almost to genius in the flowering of his personality, bearing final fruit in his tolerance and imaginative insight. I have always been somewhat downright and impatient by nature without being, I hope, dogmatic and intolerant, so that I admired his charity and infinite patience all the more. (Did not Napoleon say to a *dame de salon* who extolled chastity: "I quite understand, madame! We all admire what we haven't got.") I was moved when once he wrote to me dismissing my denunciation of a friend of mine who got drunk now and then. "Human beings are much less deliberate and responsible for their acts," he wrote, "than the moralists, novelists and dramatists make them." At the same time this is perhaps not on all fours with the Christ's admonition: "Judge not, and ye shall not be judged." One might, indeed, suspend one's judgment for a time and wait till sufficient evidence accrues to enable one to judge with

justice: but judge one must of right and wrong, unless one is not to move a step in life. The line which Sri Aurobindo took was expressed—or, rather, hinted at—in his next sentence: "I look rather to see what forces drove them than what the man himself may have seemed by inference to have intended or purposed. Our inferences are often wrong and even when they are right touch only the surface of the matter." Yes, that was Sri Aurobindo all over, for only he with his experiential knowledge of cosmic and extra-cosmic forces (overt and occult) could bring to bear the sum total of his knowledge of the goings-on behind the "surface" to get at the real Truth as against the apparent. In other words, it was because he had outgrown the commonly accepted criteria of judgment that he could, by rights, ask the common judge to pause and recognise his own intrinsically human limitations:

"Impenetrable, a mystery recondite
Is the vast plan of which we are a part;
Its harmonies are discords to our view,
Because we know not the great themes they serve."

He was worthy of admiration because he could persevere, face of seemingly insuperable obstacles, till he won the ie to the divine harmonies which subserved the "inscrutable work of cosmic agencies", as also because his restless heart of love saw that

"All we have done is ever still to do:
All breaks and all renews and is the same."

And above all, because his indomitable spirit dared (as he once wrote to me):

"to bring down some principle of inner Truth, Light, Harmony, Peace into earth-consciousness. I see it above and know what it is—I feel it gleaming down on my consciousness from above and I am seeking to make it possible for it to take up the whole being into i s n native power, instead of the nature of man

continuing to remain in half-light, half-darkness. I believe the descent of this Truth opening the way to a development of divine consciousness here to be the final cause of the earth-evolution."

The great seers in all climes have said with one voice that at the summit of consciousness knowledge is seen to be indistinguishable from Love. The great Yogi, Sri Krishnaprem, once told me succinctly: "He who says that he loves but does not know does not love, even as he who says that he knows but does not love does not know." This may, indeed, be true at the summit: nevertheless it does seem to us that on the lower plateaus of consciousness Knowledge and Love manifest themselves in appreciably different rhythms. So we would be better advised to "suspend judgment" till we grow to love knowledge more and know more of Love. For then, our hearts tell us, we shall be able to achieve the great Vision which enabled Sri Aurobindo to see God not merely as Love but—as the *Bhagavat* also has put it—as a "Servant of Love":

Thou who pervadest all the worlds below
Yet sitst above:
Master of all who work and rule and know
Servant of Love:

And the Vision that made him realise God as a vast Creator seeking humble birth in the lowest of the low:

Thou who disdainest not the worm to be
Nor even the clod:
Therefore we know in that humility
That thou art God.

Before I met Sri Aurobindo I had, indeed, admired him as a great sage, but I could never get rid of the irrepressible regret that he should be too remote to be sought as a practical guide or help except perhaps in the way a finger-post is—to be directed by rather than loved or be loved by

in return. In effect, he was—to such as we—more like a lighthouse than a boat. But when I came to know him better I realised in him a loving pilot who could address me as "a friend and a son" and as such be intimately interested in my fulfilment and salvation. Yes, knowledge is all right but the heart hungers, first and last, for love and sympathy.

But then, slowly, I came to realise something more: I saw that to know him more was to love him more. That is why I thirsted to know him more as, indeed, I wanted to know Sri Ramana Maharishi more. I remember how immensely relieved I was when the latter told me in reply to my pointed question as to whether he set as much store by Love as by Knowledge: "How could I pit the one against the other, Love being the Mother of Knowledge?" His exact words were: "*Bhakti Jnanamata.*" I bowed to Bhagavan Ramana Maharishi for having paid this tribute to Love, even as I bowed to Sri Aurobindo for having endeared God to us as the "Servant of Love."

I have not met God yet and so cannot testify from direct experience to His readiness to serve His devotees out of love for, obviously, we, in our blindness, cannot see Him as He is, far less understand His play of and at love. But though we cannot, till we meet God, claim to attest His status as a Supreme Lover, we can well accept Him as a Being of Love and Compassion from the evidence of those whom our hearts cannot help but trust: namely, those who have known Him and have been empowered by Him to act on earth as His deputies. In the Vedas I read long ago: "*Brahmavit Brahmaiva bhavati*—one who knows God becomes God." I freely confess that I do not know what this precisely imports. For if it means that he becomes omnipotent or omniscient like God and transcends overnight his human limitations (as is claimed by some fanatics), then is obviously unacceptable to such as we who cannot equate fanaticism with true faith and wisdom. But if it means

that such a man acts from an exalted, God-like consciousness which fills us with an ineffable sweetness, lights our path in darkness and goads us to seek one-pointedly and to love selflessly the God of Truth and Love, then surely there can be little objection, since we can testify from personal experience that they do supply the spur and carry us towards the beckoning God, even as wings carry us towards the purer heights. But the wings are not coeval with the sky—any more than the sages are with God. For God, to be the absolute, must be absolutely infallible and emancipated from human limitations, and no sage, however great of stature, can claim to be utterly beyond the pale of error or of human limitations. This is not to say that he is not to be worshipped. On the contrary no sage can be truly appreciated for what he is till we have offered him our hearts' homage. For only then can he help us with his light in the fullest measure and thus make us grow in knowledge, tolerance and love, till we come to realise what we have got to realise. More explicitly, while we must be loyal to his essential guidance, we must not—if we are to stay true to ourselves—follow him blindly, echoing whatever he says, till we see what he saw which made him say what he did. We can—and, indeed, often should—suspend our judgment if and when our hearts cannot fully accept all that he says, but we should not, for that reason, feel obliged to subscribe to what we find unacceptable till we have experientially verified it. Apropos, Guru Nanak said something which, as an admonition can hardly be improved upon. He said: "You may, indeed, say that such and such a statement you *believe* to be true because your Guru says it but you have no right to assert that it *is* true unless and until you have seen or known it to be true." And what do we *see* or *know?*—Merely that the Guru followed an ever-evolving Gleam in his heart in whose growing light he saw more and more into the heart of Reality and thus became more and more at one with its essential Truth and Bliss. So we, too, if we are to be true disciples of our

Gurus, should never follow them sheepishly but only in the discriminating light of an ever-deepening realisation. At any rate that is how I myself have come to cherish them as reliable pathfinders in life's pilgrimage to Truth, to be venerated seeingly but not idolised fanatically. And among such heroic spirits who are intermittently sent from on high to relieve our global gloom, Sri Aurobindo certainly stands in a class by himself, not only because of his profound knowledge of human nature and encyclopaedic grasp of racial cultures, but also because of his marvellous power of expression both in prose and verse. I stress these two aspects of his personality knowing full well that these, by themselves, do not mark out anybody as a spiritual personality. But about his spiritual greatness I need hardly add anything to the tribute I have paid him already and fairly exhaustively. So I will only say that he stood always for those who knew him a little intimately as one of the brightest beacons in the dark and stormy waters of modern life, a lighthouse that created faith in the shipwreck of rational hope. It is this faith which made him write to me once: "To me the ultimate value of a man is to be easured not by what he says, nor even by what he does, but by what he *becomes.*"

..nd he *became* a seer of seers who was thrilled by what e had *seen,* which in its turn made him into what he ecame: a prophet of the incredible future that is waiting r Man in the next phase of his evolution:

"Night shall awake to the anthem of the stars,
The days become a happy pilgrim march....
A few shall see what none yet understands;
Gods shall grow up while wise men talk and sleep;
r man shall not know the coming till its hour
elief shall not be till the work is done."

Even those who have seen him only once have known something, were it even a fraction, of the rapture that impelled him to write:

"A deathbound littleness is not all we are:
Immortal our forgotten vastnesses
Await discovery in our summit selves.

But even those who have never seen or known him have been left the supreme legacy of his mighty message, the last fruit of a *tapasya* which counted no cost to attain what few even dare to contemplate:

"The Supermind shall claim the world for Light
And thrill with love of God the enamoured heart
And place Light's crown on Nature's lifted head
And found Light's reign on her unshaking base
Illumine common acts with the Spirit's Ray
And meet the Deity in common things."

I must pause here, even at the risk of ending on a note of anti-climax, to speculate a little about how Sri Aurobindo is likely to be estimated by posterity. It will be impressed, I feel, not merely because he was a great poet and a great Yogi. It will be impressed by him also and, by and large, as a paradox, to wit, an earthling who yet transcended the downpull of the earth while loving and blessing it as no earth-enamoured poet had ever loved and blest her. And in him the paradox was resolved—so will men feel—precisely because he fully believed in the ever-deepening significance of earth-life and what it connoted. This he explained to me in a brief but supremely suggestive le in answer to my "realistic doubt" as to the possibility such an inglorious, disharmonious and creaturely thing our earth being redeemed overnight by a glorious supra mental apocalypse.

"All the non-evolutionary worlds," he wrote, "are worlds limited to their own harmony like the *life heavens*.[2] The earth, on the other hand, is an evolutionary world—not at all glorious or harmonious even as a material world (except in certain appearances) but rather most sorrowful, disharmonious, imperfect."

Nevertheless, though the realist in him admitted this, the idealist in him saw no cause for despair, because:

"Yet in that imperfection is the urge towards a higher and many-sided perfection. It contains the last finite which yet yearns to the Supreme Infinite; it is not satisfied by the sense joys precisely because in the conditions of the earth it is able to see their limitations. God is pent in the mire—mire is not glorious, so there is no claim to glory or beauty here—but the very fact imposes a necessity to break through that prison to a consciousness which is ever rising towards the heights."

In other words, in Sri Aurobindo's Vision is harmonised the last incompatibility, blended the irreconcilable antinomy between Matter and Spirit. Not that the ancient seers had missed the supreme clue: their deep intuition too had laughed at the *maya* of the phenomenal reality and posited: "*Yadeveha tadamutra*—whatever is there is here as well." But the trouble is that the tyranny of the physical-rational mind has come today to be so universally idolised that such a mystic vision, being beyond its comprehension, is scoffed at by the modern mind as too cryptic to be taken seriously, if not as too good to be true. That is why Sri Aurobindo is likely to be looked upon by posterity as the Messiah of this post-scientific age—a true Messiah because even when he met the challenge of reason with reason, he could asseverate, with the authority of his vision which no mental reason could command:

[2]Sri Aurobindo uses the term to mean the higher worlds of ony which exist side by side with our world; worlds of gods superior be`igs.

"This world was not built with random bricks of chance,
A blind God is not our destiny's architect:
A conscious power has drawn the plan of life,
There is a meaning in each curve and line."

Which meaning must warrant that even death is not the tragedy it seems, because,

"Arisen from the tragic crash of life,
Arisen from the body's torture and death,
The spirit rises mightier by defeat,
Its Godlike wings grow wider with each fall,
Its splendid failures sum to victory."

And the reason, as he saw clearly, is simply that,

"Truth made the world, not a blind Nature-Force;
For here is not our large diviner heights;
Our summits in the superconscient blaze
Are glorious with the very face of God:
There is our aspect of eternity,
There is the figure of the god we are,
His young unaging look on deathless things,
His joy in our escape from death and Time,
His immortality and light and bliss."

THE END

All the passages in blank verse which have been quoted here are taken from Sri Aurobindo's poem, *Savitri* the last volume of which was published posthumously, in 1951, directly after his passing.

APPENDIX

In Chapter VIII of my book, I have referred to a letter bearing out Sri Bhupal Chandra Bose's account of the divine miracle which I have described in my narrative. A friend of mine, Sri Nalini Kanto Sarcar, has just sent me a copy of this letter which, at my request, he ferreted it from among the old issues of the journal, *Manasi a armavani*. The one in which this letter was published was printed in the month of *Paus* 1335, Bengali calendar, which corresponds to January, 1927. From this long letter (written by the devotee himself in Bengali) it appears that Ashutosh was the name of the friend to whom his letter had been addressed. Sri Sarcar writes to me that my memory must here have failed me inasmuch as he also heard the identical story from Sri Bose who told him that the devotee's name was Kalidas Banerji. So I hasten to correct the mistake and append below relevant portions from the letter which I have translated into English while condensing it, in order to economise space. I may add that this letter was sent to the journal sponsored by an eminent man, Dr. Sarasi Lal Sarcar who testified to its authenticity.

"Dear Ashu, Shillong. May 3, 1923.

The accident you refer to as 'unfortunate' I consider as exceedingly *fortunate* in that my life has become blessed because it happened to me. I had, initially, decided not to breathe about it to a single soul. But, as it happened, I could not help relating it to one or two friends of mine who, in their turn, must have retailed it to others. So, now that the milk *is* spilt, there seems to be no point in keeping it back from you. So here is a full account.

"The incident happened on March 11 (*phalgun* 28) ... I took refuge in Sri Bhupal Bose's house at his

own request...: My school was very close to this house.... One day, as I was standing near the school-gates, I saw that a house in front had caught fire."

Then he gives a pretty long account of the fire and all that followed which tallies substantially with the account I have given already. So to wind up.

"I called out: 'Ma..... Ma!'—I hardly know why. Because as far as I can remember, I cannot set it down to a hope that I would be rescued ... And then I heard a sweet voice answering: 'Fear no more. I have come!' I opened my eyes. And O my beloved Ashu! How can I describe what I saw—the inconceivable! The wildest imagination cannot imagine Her beauty—made of the essence of lightning beside whose effulgence even the roaring fire flickered pale!! .... I can't write any more."

Then came the postscript.

"Yesterday I wrote as far as this.... When I came to ... a coolie cried out: 'O Babu! Are you still alive?' ... An eminent physician told me that my face would look like that of one affected with white leprosy...."

Then after having described in detail how the Mother came and talked to him....

"She said sweetly: 'On the last day of the month of *chaitra* your face shall become quite normal once more after your daily bath—you will see.' Before I could reply she had vanished.... Then, strangely enough, I forgot all about the prophecy and, on that fateful day, had my bath as usual.... A friend of mine who had been waiting for me, exclaimed, on seeing me: 'How marvellous, indeed! Your face shows not a wrinkle—absolutely normal! Come, look in the [illegible]

"As soon as I heard this I flopped down on the ground and sobbed out: 'Mother! O Mother! O Mother! O Mother!....'

Yesterday I wrote thus far but could not continue.

Sri Kalidas"

N.B.—The name of the writer was not printed in the journal: I have inserted it relying on Sri Sarcar's memory.

D.K.R.

GLOSSARY

A glossary is seldom consulted, for it is never convenient for the reader to turn to it while he is actually reading. I have taken care, therefore, to explain the meanings of such Sanskrit terminology as I have had to use, either in the body of my text or in the footnotes. This means that only those words which have cropped up too often to be explained repeatedly, will be noted here.

Sādhana and *Tapasya* mean very nearly the same thing: persevering self-discipline on the spiritual path. *Tapasyā* is the stronger term because it puts a premium on austerities. Sri Aurobindo has translated it by the Greek word, *askesis*.

Asana is the posture, which may be of various kinds, that is taken when practising meditation.

Prānāyāma means slow measured breathing practised regularly to achieve mastery over *prāna*, the seat of vital desires and cravings.

Dharma is the spirituality which upholds society. Europeans have sometimes translated it by the word *duty*, which is too confined a term, although *dharma* includes duty. Hence *swadharma* means one's own *dharma*, or native line of development.

Mantra is a name, or incantation, or string of sacred words which is usually repeated again and again by the *sādhaka* in order to achieve concentration. It is sometimes used loosely to indicate a motto or vow.

Samskāra is difficult to translate. Europeans have sometimes rendered it by the term *'instinct'*, but that again is too restricted, although *samskāra* includes the instinct. It is really a most pregnant word comprising as it does, mental formations (*idées fixes*), impressions of past habits and experiences stored up in the subconscious, the sum-total of which determines a person's reactions to life.

Sādhaka is one who practises *sādhana*, an aspirant.

Sādhu and *Mela* have been explained in the first page of the introduction.

Tirtha has been explained in the chapter entitled *Kumbha as a Symbol*..

